Comic Book Addiction trtansported Cerebus trade paperbacks to the Big Apple National Show. This drawing was their payment.

Following Cerebus

Vol. 1 #7 February 2006

***Following Cerebus* produced by**
Craig Miller
&
John Thorne

***Cerebus* comic book by**
Dave Sim
&
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Dave Sim: Marathon Man

J. Michael Straczynski

Because my memory is not what I seem to recall it having been previously, I can't tell you *which* Cerebus issue I first purchased, but I can tell you the *circumstances* under which I found it.

During the early 80s I was a staff writer at Filmation, working on such culturally ennobling series as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (for which crime at least one circle of hell has been set aside with my name on it). While much of the experience was salutary, other aspects were soul-killing to anyone who believed he or she had something more to say than was generally accepted in the form...which was pretty much nothing of substance. You can only write Orko saying "Yike!" or have your protagonist beat a considerably more formidable opponent by simply tossing it out of frame so many times before you ascend the nearest bell tower with a high powered rifle and start popping off innocent passersby.

But for many of us at Filmation, writers and artists alike, Wednesdays were our salvation. Wednesday was comic book day. We'd grab lunch at the nearest Arby's, because it was fast, and spend the rest of that hour checking out the latest arrivals at the local comic book store.

On one such hot Los Angeles afternoon, I remember moving down the aisle in search of something *new*, something *different*, and not finding it. Row after row of the same-old same-old: brightly-colored covers showcasing superheros, super-sidekicks, costumed vigilantes, superteams, super-loners, aardvarks, masked avengers —

Waitaminnit.

Aardvark?

Someone's doing an adventure comic about an aardvark?

This I had to see.

What I found inside was simply stunning. There is no other word that describes it. Wonderfully funny wordplay, outrageous slapstick, terrific action, complex characters, political satire, philosophical meditations, and ruminations on the delicate intersection between religion, money, power, control and individuality. As if this weren't enough, sandwiched into the story were versions of Foghorn Leghorn, Groucho Marx, Mick Jagger, Margaret Thatcher and others that I wasn't then culturally hip enough to pick out of the background.

But I knew greatness when I saw it.

Face it, whatever the critics say, we always know genius when we see it paraded in front of us. The first time you saw *Blade Runner*, the first time you heard *Ode to Joy*, the first time you read *The Lord of the Rings*...even before anybody told you to feel this way, didn't you know instantly that it was a classic? That it was the product of a singular intellect possessed of ambitions beyond the ordinary, backed up by the talent, the persistence, and the sheer tenaciousness to bring that unique vision to life?

Didn't you just *know?*

Then you will understand what I mean when I say that the first time I picked up Cerebus...I *knew*.

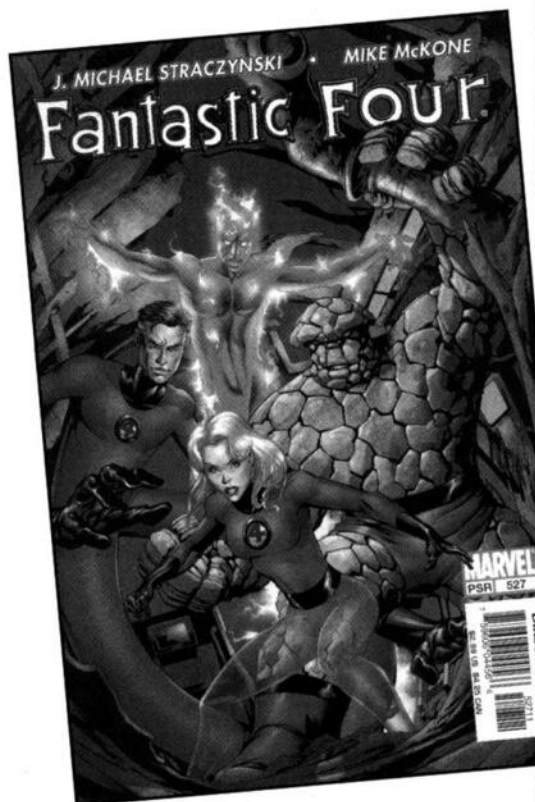
I picked up every back issue I could find, and read them straight through. Started bugging my comics store to fill in the gaps, and to call whenever a new issue was coming in so I wouldn't miss it...because I was sure that at any moment, somebody was going to sue this book into oblivion.

I say that because there *were* so many parodies of known and established characters, from Wolverine to Margaret Thatcher (who may actually be the same person), Mick Jagger, Oscar Wilde, Keith Richards and Captain America. I was sure that at some point an overly-ambitious and humor-impaired attorney would set his sights on this book. *Dave Sim's got guts, I'll give him that*, I thought at the time, as I waited for the hammer to fall.

But the hammer never fell, at least not where I could see it. And I was very glad to see it happen (or not happen, I suppose) because the inclusion of such figures may have seemed arbitrary or silly or indulgent, but in fact they were necessary to what Dave was trying to achieve.

Because as we folks who work in TeeVee know, casting is everything...and who better to play Lord Julius than Groucho Marx?

The moment you put Groucho into that role, you trigger certain reactions from those readers who recognize the character for who he is. It instantly tells you everything you need to know not only about the character, but how we should view the social and political infrastructure in which he functions. You know immediately that the city of Palnu is a ludicrous and laughable tangle of bureaucracies, that it's all based on bluff and nonsense, that the entire *system* is structurally absurd. Because under no other system could someone like this particular individual come into power.

Through Cerebus, Dave Sim used contemporary figures not just as cameos in the story, which

would be noteworthy enough, but to underscore thematic, political and religious points in ways that not only served the fictional story, but bounced back as contemporary political and religious commentary. It was like putting two mirrors facing each other...the humor, the satire, and the point of view worked in both directions, reflecting both on the story and back again into the real world.

If an anonymous woman had showed up in Jaka's Story as a Cirinist, saying "I'm here to HELP you," we might not think too much of it at the time. Might even take it as an earnest expression.

But when she shows up as Mrs. Thatcher, the scene suddenly takes on an ominous subtext...and when she says "I'm here to HELP you," we also know, instantly, that she may in fact believe just that...but that her version of helping may not touch Jaka's notion of helping someone at any two contiguous points.

We know at that moment that this is a person far more interested in *controlling* someone than in *helping* someone.

It was amazing.

Maybe I need to get out more, but *I had never seen anything like this before.* It was revolutionary, it was insightful...it was lunatic.

It showed us that these people have *always* been with us, in one form or another. It showed us that though times change, and governments rise and fall, there is always *someone* like Thatcher, *someone* like Jagger, *someone* (thankfully) like Groucho around.

And it was damned entertaining.

In addition to the political and religious satires, there are pages and sequences of Cerebus that to this day make me laugh out loud, and that ain't easy.

"Casting is everything—and who better to play Lord Julius than Groucho Marx?"

To go back to the Filmation days...because the wing where I worked was filled with writers and artists, eccentrics every one, the halls around my office were filled with drawings, cartoons, sketches and the like. But there was only one drawing on the door to my office: the scene where Elrod tells Cerebus that he can't be argued with because he has a pointy hat, and you can't argue with a pointy hat.

I put it on my door because after arguing story points with the producer on the show, whose logic in mandating changes was all too often of the pointy-hat variety, that page would make me laugh on my way back into my office and put the whole thing into perspective.

The producer, suffice to say, never got the connection.

To tell a story the length and breadth and depth of the Cerebus saga purchases for you membership in a very elite club. It is a club whose members are those who have somehow managed to tell one really big story over the course of years. That club includes Peter Jackson, George Lucas, the Wachowski siblings, me...and Dave Sim. Only someone who's been through those wars, who's tried to tell one story, from one point of view, across the sea of years, can really understand what it takes from you.

There were times I begrudged the fact that sometimes, later in the run of Cerebus, it seemed there were more letters pages than pages of the book proper (or improper)...but knowing later what it takes to tell a story of that length, of that degree of complexity, I don't begrudge a panel of it.

When Pheidippides ran from the battlefield at Marathon (hence the name) to Athens in 490 BC to deliver word of victory, there was not one person to begrudge him having paused once or twice along the way to catch his breath.

The difference between Pheidippides and Dave Sim is that Pheidippides died of exhaustion once he had finally delivered his message. By contrast, Dave Sim is still with us. Where they are the same...is that both got to the end of their long road, and both missions were concluded with word of victory.

For Pheidippides and his fellow Athenians, the word was *nenikikamen*, meaning *We have won.*

For Dave Sim and his readers, the operative phrase was...The End.

We have won.

We have won over publishing schedules, detractors, critics, people who said it couldn't be done, people who said it *shouldn't* be done, people who saw misogyny where there was only commentary, who saw indulgence where there was determination, who saw creative control as egocentrism, who saw an individual voice at work and declared it conceit.

Which was to be expected. To quote German philosopher George Christoph Lichtenberg, "A book is a mirror. If an ass peers into it, you can't expect an apostle to peer out."

So yes, there were a few asses to be found along the way.

But far, far more apostles, drawn to the truth

"When Mrs. Thatcher says, "I'm here to HELP you," the scene suddenly takes on an ominous subtext."

of the story being told.

Though I have been a fan of Dave Sim's work for many, many years, I never had the opportunity to meet him until we both chanced to be a the same post-convention reception held at a Toronto bar. I made my way across the crowded bar, shoved a hand in his direction and, transforming instantly into the awe-stuck fanboy I am at heart, said "Hi, my name is Joe Straczynski, from *Babylon 5,* and I'm a huge fan of your work."

I don't think he quite knew what to make of the statement, because I was a TeeVee guy, and frankly we're not known for our sincerity. So as he tried to find something gracious to say, I said, "I got a tall pointy hat! That's status, boy! You can argue with me but you can't argue with status!"

Midway through, he joined in to finish the refrain. And smiled.

It was one of the best nights I've had in a long, long time.

Year after year, month after (more or less) month, Cerebus made me laugh and think and kept me sane. And it showed me something very important: that you could tell one long story over a period of years, across hundreds of issues, and not only *could* readers follow it, the subtleties and nuances layered on over the course of those years would add a breathtaking degree of subtext and context to everything that happened.

And this was an important thing for me to learn.

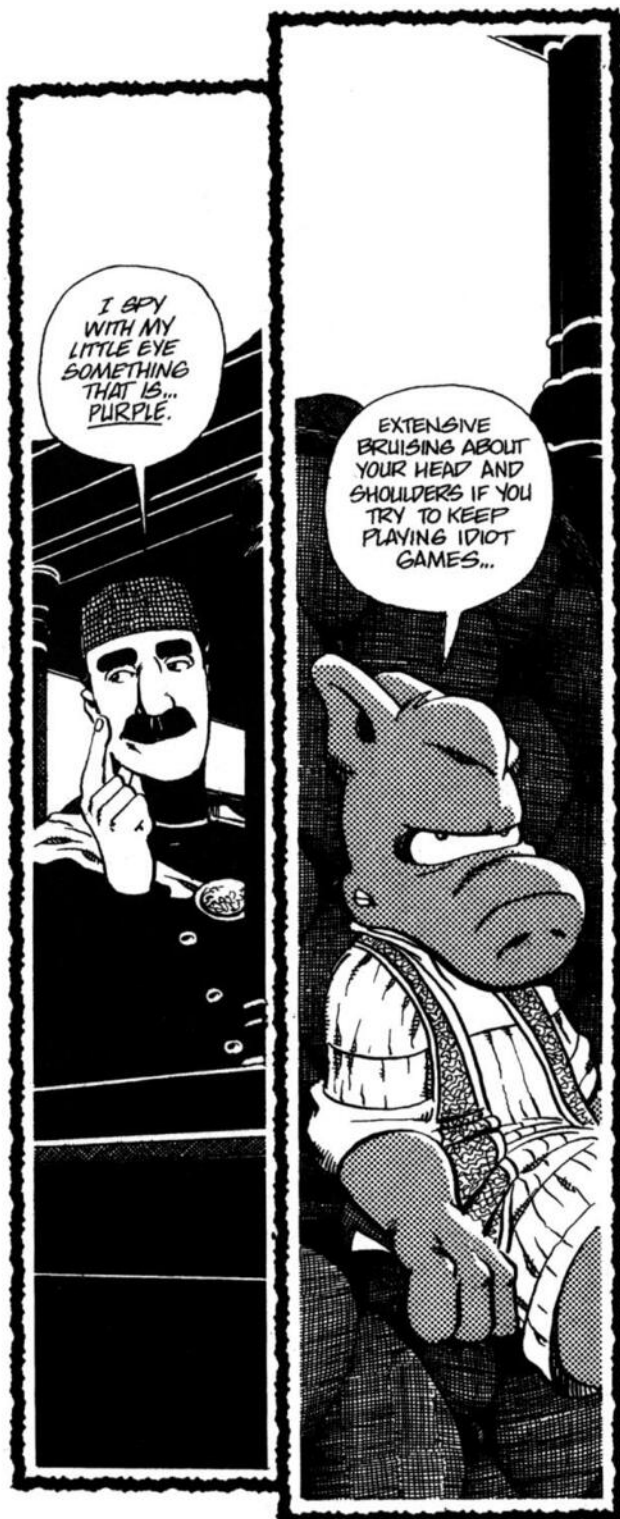
Because when I went out to sell *Babylon 5,* one long story to be told over a period of five years, across a hundred episodes, studio executives and network suits told me that it wouldn't work, that viewers couldn't follow it.

And I would say to them—to the faces that regarded me with dull eyes and a complete lack of understanding — "You're wrong. I *know* it can work...because it works in *Cerebus*."

And I was right.

And he was right.

But I will never, ever forget that he was right *first.*

J. Michael Straczynski
Los Angeles, California
26 June 2005

Cerebus & Buffy

Part 1: the Pre-Game Introductions

I. What is Buffy Doing in a Cerebus Magazine?

Buffy the Vampire Slayer never appeared in *Cerebus*. Cerebus never appeared in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Dave Sim never wrote *Buffy* (TV or comic). *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon has written some comics but never *Cerebus*. So why does Buffy keep appearing in *Following Cerebus?*

Up until a few months ago, Dave had never seen an episode of *Buffy* (Aardvark-Vanaheim's TV had long ago been put in storage), but for a long time he thought Buffy actress Sarah Michelle Gellar was a cutie (as do many others). As we were preparing to publish the first edition of *Following Cerebus*, Dave thought it would be fun to include "Dave's Favorite Buffy Photo of the Month" in each issue as an excuse to see more of SMG. In the end, he decided to add some amusing commentary to each photo.

Eventually, we thought it would be interesting to see what Dave thought of an actual episode. After all, we've written extensively aobut the series in *Spectrum* (our TV/film/art mag). But which episode should we send to Dave? We chose "Passion" from the second season. Though not the best of the series (that would probably be "The Body," though others—"Hush," "Fool For Love," "The Gift," "Once More With Feeling," "Dead Things," and "Normal Again," to name a few—aren't far behind), it would certainly be in our list of top ten episodes* and may be the first truly great episode for a show that had some uneven quality its first season and a half. More than that, "Passion" succinctly deals with themes not only present throughout the series, but themes that Dave has dealt with in *Cerebus* as well (we'll explain below).

So we sent a videotape off to Dave, and he took the trouble to have Gerhard hook up the A-V television and VCR for the first time since they were used for Woody Allen reference in *Latter Days*.

What we were looking for was not as much a "review" of the episode—though that was certainly one avenue that could be taken—as a way for Dave to discuss the themes brought up in "Passion" and how they are presented in *Cerebus* versus *Buffy* or, more than that, in the mass media today.

II. What's *Buffy* All About?

"Into each generation, a Slayer is born. One girl, in all the world, a Chosen One. One born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to stop the spread of evil." The TV series (which began in 1997) sprang from the 1992 feature film of the same name starring Kristy Swanson as Buffy, the Slayer. Joss Whedon wrote it as a dark comedy, but director Fran Rubel Kuzui turned it into a straightforward comedy, and Whedon at that point in his career had no power to stop the revision. (He later co-wrote *Toy Story*, which increased his standing significantly.) With the TV series, he wanted to return to his original idea with the darker tone.

Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy

One early storyline proved popular with fans. Angel is a 200+-year-old vampire. He and Buffy fell in love, which complicated the whole Buffy-kills-as-many-vampires-as-she-can assignment.

Angel (who ended up starring in a spin-off TV series) was introduced in the first season and has a fascinating, if somewhat complicated, history. Many years ago, Angel (then called Angelus) was turned into a vampire and terrorized the Gypsies in Rumania. They cursed him by giving him his soul back; thus he was haunted by his killings. In an effort of redeption, he tries to help Buffy fight evil. But, according to the curse, if he ever experiences a moment of true bliss, he will lose his soul again. That happened midway through the second season, when he slept with Buffy. He lost his soul and, after being a "good guy" for years, is

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*Despite our love for the episode, it has made few "favorite episode" lists published over the years. However, it does make Joss Whedon's list of "ten favorite episodes that weren't directed" by him (a list that appeared in the booklet accompanying the "Chosen Collection" of *Buffy* DVDs).

now evil again.

Buffy is aided by Rupert Giles, ostensibly the high school librarian, but actually a Watcher (i.e. trainer)—every Slayer has one. Buffy's friends—Willow, Xander, and Cordelia, dubbed the "Scooby Gang"—assist her, though they don't have the special powers that the Slayer has. Buffy's mom does not know about her daughter's extracurricular activities.

III. What's "Passion" All About?

This episode takes place a few weeks after Buffy and Angel slept together. Angel turned evil, but Buffy can't bring herself to kill him. Nevertheless, Angel launches an all-out attack on Buffy: "She made me feel like a human being. That's not the kind of thing you just forgive," he says in "Innocence." His attacks, however, will be indirect, because she's too strong to kill with force. "To kill this girl, you have to love her."

His first major attack is to kill the school's computer science teacher, Jenny Calendar, who had struck up a romance with Giles. There was, however, some friction between Calendar and the others when it was discovered that she had been sent by the Gypsies to spy on Buffy and Angel when they became a couple (the Gypsies worried that he would lose his soul and become evil again—which is exactly what happened). Calendar was a well-liked recurring character. Her sudden death at Angel's hands was Whedon's way of telling the audience that on this show, nobody was safe.

That alone makes "Passion" a rare television experience, but more than that is Angel's voice-over narration of the episode in which he expounds on the nature of passion and its role in our lives. "Passion. It lies in all of us—sleeping, waiting, and though unwanted, unbidden, it will stir, open its jaws and howl. It speaks to us, guides us. Passion rules us all, and we obey. What other choice do we have?" Later, he says, "Passion is the source of our finest moments—the joy of love, the clarity of hatred, and the ecstacy of grief." And finally, "It hurts sometimes more than we can bear. If we could live without passion, maybe we'd know some kind of peace, but we would be hollow....Without passion, we'd be truly dead."

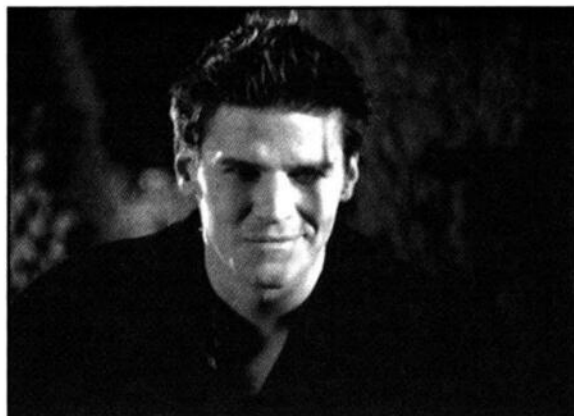
In Rick's Story, *a dispassionate Cerebus rationally evaluates his situation. Or not.*

IV. What's *Buffy* All About? (Part 2)

Here, then, we are getting to the heart of what makes *Buffy* one of the darkest television shows ever made. The title character's name may conjure images of Valley Girl vapidity, but "slayer" is the real theme here. Death is an overriding presence, not just for the vampires and their victims, but for the Slayer herself. For the Chosen One, her life's work is laid out before her without her permission. A violent death at the hands of a monster awaits her some day; that is the way every Slayer's life ends.

In the meantime, there is life, ruled by the passions that we didn't ask for, passions that can—and probably will—destroy us. As Angel asks rhetorically, what choice do we have? The series poses a no-win dilemma—give in to the passions and be ruled by them, or live a hollow peace without them.

"Passion" is the first episode of the series that emphasizes this theme, but it occurs repeatedly in the series, often brought to the fore courtesy of Spike the vampire (whose favorite television show is the daytime soap *Passions*). In "Lover's Walk" he comments on the Buffy/Angel relationship: "You'll be in love until it kills you both...Love isn't brains, children, it's blood—blood screaming inside you to work its will." Another episode, "Fool For Love" (the title itself is the giveaway clue), explores the complicated love/hate relationship between Spike—who's already killed two Slayers over the years—and

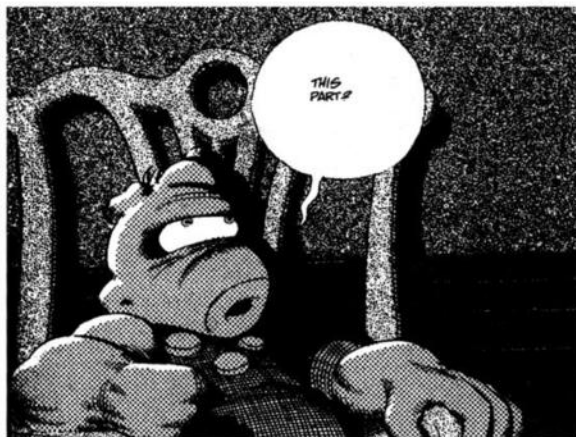
The series shocked viewers when Angel (David Boreanaz) unexpectedly killed Miss Calendar (Robia LaMorte), a popular recurring character (above left). Later, as Buffy and Willow (Alyson Hannigan) get the grim news (above right), Angel spies from a window (right).

Buffy. Passion, death, and peace are entangled. Spike tells Buffy, "Death is your art....That final gasp, that look of peace. Part of you is desperate to know what's it like, where does it lead you?...Every Slayer has a death wish. Even you."

Douglas Petrie, writer of a number of great *Buffy* episodes (including "Fool For Love"), said in *Spectrum* 34 about the show's dark portrayal of passion, "It's about passion, and passion leading you astray. That's the emotional backdrop of the show itself." This is where *Buffy* diverges from so many of the clones that followed it—there are no lived-happily-ever-after relationships here, and such pessimism follows from the show's "emotional backdrop."

V. Joss Whedon's Universe

More than that, it follows from creator Joss Whedon's pessimistic view of life. The admitted atheist created a world that began as the inverse of the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden. In Buffy's universe, the world started as a place of evil ruled by demons. Man entered the scene later and took control, but the forces of darkness are still powerful and threatening, seeking to reclaim their territory.

Eventually, the emotional darkness that is pent up within the characters is bound to explode. Why should Buffy and her friends continue to fight—continue to *live*—under such bleak conditions? Whedon provided his answer in the sixth-season episode "Once More With Feeling" (again the title is the clue), the musical episode. Buffy asks, "Give me something to sing about," and Spike answers, "Life's not a song. Life isn't bliss. Life is just this: it's living. You'll get along. The pain that you feel, you only can heal by living." Buffy isn't thrilled with the answer but decides that allowing herself to experience the emotions that she's pushed away is the lesser of two evils.

This represented somewhat of a change for Buffy, because in the third season she was contrasted with another Slayer, Faith (yes, we know there's supposed to be only one Slayer alive at a time; it's complicated), who was on a self-destructive track because of her passions. Buffy was the cool, rational Slayer; Faith the irresponsible, reckless, wild Slayer. The series clearly favored Buffy's methods. Still, Buffy's sixth-season "turnaround" wasn't Faith-like.

Cerebus and Jaka get all emotional in Going Home.

Passion was Faith's full-time nature; Buffy was merely vacationing there.

All this created an irony in the foundation of the show, which Whedon has stated he intended to be a pro-feminist series. And indeed, the series finale, written and directed by Whedon, ends with some heavy-handed ideology suggesting that multiple Slayers are awakening all over the world by tapping into the Slayer within, or something like that (it may have been heavy-handed, but it was still muddled). There was also the recurring theme throughout the seven years that Buffy succeeded where other Slayers failed because she wasn't trying to do everything alone—she had her family and Scoobies to help her.

And yet Whedon and the other writers were honest enough about human nature to realize that an emotion-based heroine—an emotion-based *world*—is not an ideal situation. It doesn't bring peace. It doesn't bring contentment. At best, it brings a slight reprieve from the gloominess of life and the impending death that awaits us all.

It may not be the real world we all live in, but it's Joss Whedon's world, and it's a great place to visit.

Part 2: My First Buffy

Review by Dave Sim

"Passion"
Teleplay by Ty King
Directed by Michael E. Gershman
Buffy the Vampire Slayer 2nd Season

It speaks to us...guides us...passion rules us all...and we obey. What other choice do we have?

Having agreed, at Craig's behest, to actually review an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—Gerhard brought in the company VCR and hooked it up to the company television to make that possible—I figured I had better write things down as I watched it, in case I really couldn't bear to go through it again.

(My primary concern had been that the title, "Passion," was intended in the Christological Dictionary-definition sense of the term—"a: the sufferings of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death; b: an oratorio based on a gospel narrative of the Passion." I wasn't sure how much I was willing to watch—even for the sake of *Following Cerebus*—if this was somehow going to be enacted with Sarah Michele Gellar in place of Jesus. Fortunately it turned out to be "passion" in its more earthbound and mundane sense: "intense, driving, or overmastering feeling or conviction")

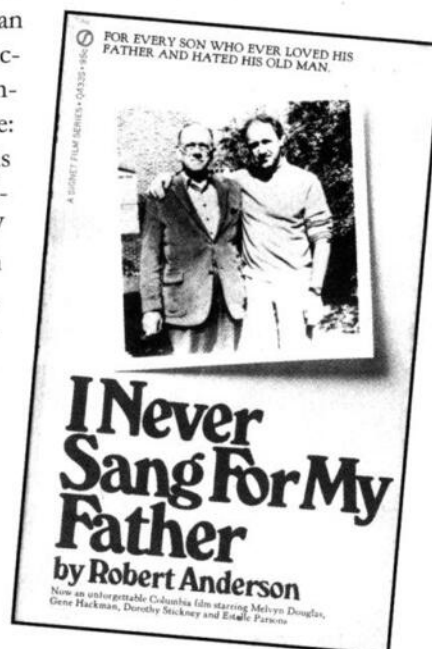
The above quote, a voice-over, was the first thing that caught my attention. Voice-over in a television drama has a peculiar effect that it doesn't have in a movie. It expresses serious intent, signals that the writer intends the frying of large thematic fish. One of the more effective uses of the device was in Robert Anderson's *I Never Sang for My Father,* which I can still quote, roughly, from memory, even though I haven't seen the film in a good twenty years.

Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship...which struggles on in the survivor's mind towards a resolution it may never find.

Having the lead actor—in this case Gene Hackman—quote the line in voice-over lends ambient

Angel: "Passion rules us all, and we obey."

nuances of *gravitas* to the observation. I suspect that the net effect upon the viewer is a spirit-oriented one which—because of the structural nature of television (consisting of viewer, television, and the space between them)—causes the observation to hover in between the viewer and the television set, thus generating a heightened sense of intimacy (I'm taking it as a given, here, that most television viewing is accomplished in the viewer's home and is, consequently, a more intimate experience than is the "public-collectivist" movie-consuming experience: unless the movie is in the form of a videotape or TV broadcast in which case it becomes, for all practical intents and purposes—at least in the McLuhanist sense—a TV show). It not only breaks the fourth wall but moves the com-

munication into a non-physical and purely auditory realm. It participates, as a result, in direct thematic proximity to telepathy. The Gene Hackman character has superseded his physical context, has risen above his television-bound existence and is communicating directly with me (and with my family members or whoever else is watching the TV program with me) inside my head. This, the effect suggests, is important—its closest experiential analog being the direct communication between God and His prophets and messengers. It's perhaps interesting to note that according to Anderson's introduction to the Signet paperback edition of 1970, *I Never Sang for My Father* began life as a screenplay called *The Tiger,* later became a play which *almost* became a television play at CBS and then, ultimately, became a film from Columbia Pictures starring Melvyn Douglas, Gene Hackman and Estelle Parsons. Up until the moment that I pulled out my copy of the paperback, I had been certain that it had been a made-for-TV movie.

Of course, lying flat on the page below, the

"Voice-over in a television drama... signals that the writer intends the frying of large thematic fish."

voice-over effect of the "passion" quote isn't quite the same. There on the page in cold hard type, the question presented switches completely from its intended expression of a self-evidently rhetorical concept to being, instead, (so far as I can see) transparently devoid of inherent meaning. Once stripped of the structural super-intimacy of presenting itself as a Voice of Great Spiritual Wisdom inside your head, the question, in fact, expresses little else but the inherent "non-content" of emotion-based decision-making:

What other choice do we have?

What choice do we have *besides* letting passion rule us all, *besides* obeying passion unquestioningly? Um, lots (actually). Lots and lots of choice. You could read a book or take tap-dancing lessons or write a nice birthday card to your favourite aunt. You could wash the dishes or clean out that closet you keep meaning to get to. You could start learning a foreign language or put all your books in alphabetical order. The quote is interesting more for what it reveals about the nature of television as an emotion-based medium than for any kind of insight that it implies or which might be inferred from it. It reinforces the misapprehension that passion is the only valid choice in life: which seems to be one of the key points of television as a medium, a medium which endeavours to incite strong emotions within its hypnotized adherents and then to use that suggestible state to sell them things.

(One of the core problems that I have with taking television seriously as a medium of communication is exactly that implied super-structure. The largest narrative purpose of a television program is to sell you laundry soap or Doritos™ or something at appropriate intervals where your emotions have been excited to their optimum level. The arousal of strong emotions is just the bait, the commercial is the hook. In that context, "passion rules us all...and we obey. What other choice do we have?" would have to qualify as a perfect expression both satisfying and partaking of all relevant aspects of television as a medium. All that is missing is the logical, structural "non-content" endpoint extrapolation/conclusion: "So buy more Doritos™")

The next part where I paused the tape and wrote down the dialogue was the exchange between Mr. Giles and Miss Calendar:

Calendar: *I didn't know I was going to fall in love with you.* [seeing his reaction] *Oh, God. Is it too late to take that back?*
Giles: *Do you want to?*
Calendar: *I just want to be right with you. I don't expect more. I just want so badly to make all this up to you.*
Giles: *I understand. But I'm not the one you need to make it up to.*

This, it seems to me, identifies it (sorry, Craig) as a "chick show". There is a laboured quality to dialogue that centers on key relationship points that writers learn to make use of when writing for female or androgynous audiences which is at extreme variance from how such conversations unfold in the real world, but in conformity with how women would like them to unfold. "I just want to be right with you" cuts at a 90-degree angle to the way unrequited passionate love (or infatuation: the emotion-based are not keen on drawing distinctions between the two) would ordinarily express itself. If she really had the major hots for Giles, it's not the sort of thing that she would say, but it's the sort of thing that the heart of a female audience member is going to lurch towards (as she spoons up another glob of the Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Fudge Brownie Ice Cream she's chowing down on). It identifies Miss Calendar as Selfless rather than Selfish and, consequently, worthy of being loved by her intended quarry (I object your honour: that last noun is a

Calendar (with Giles): "I just want to be right with you."

pejorative. Sustained. Strike "quarry" from the court record.)...by her intended paramour. She has laid her soul naked before him by confessing her love and asks nothing in return. In the real world that's usually where the serious deal-making and horse-trading starts, if not before. She'll tell you she loves you, but only after you've jumped through an appropriate number of hoops and things are tracking in the right direction on her internal emotion-based radar screen. The selfless declaration of love with no strings attached is an inherent falsehood not dissimilar, thematically, to Buffy sleeping, as she does earlier in this episode, in full make-up—eyeliner, mascara, blush and lipstick (all beautifully applied by a professional, I might add). That isn't done in the real world, either. Only on television or in the movies. It is no small point which underlines the female desire for portrayal to become reality. Wouldn't it be nice if my greasepaint enhanced appearance were the way I actually looked? Wouldn't it be nice if saying you "just want to be right with someone" got you a devoted permanent life-mate?

The exchange has the appearance of a dating guide which a lot of female entertainment tends to have. "Lesson #14: Declare your love for him and ask nothing in return—let him go away and think about it, and when he comes back he'll be yours, unquestioningly." Certainly holds a lot of appeal for today's busy career girl—Miss Calendar sets about her computer crunching business with scarcely another thought for Mr. Giles, and here he comes right after the second set of commercials all set to play a serious game of house.

I don't want him to be lonely...I don't want anyone to.

Definitely had to write that one down. Speaking as someone who is alone constantly but who literally can't remember the last time he could describe himself as "lonely," I worry about our society's inability to understand the distinction. I get described a lot as a recluse by people who don't know me. I really don't see myself that way—my own experience is that you get things done far more effectively when you're alone than when you have company. It's easier to write this review, as an example, on my own than it would be if I had a half-dozen chums over visiting with whom I was carrying on a robust conversation. Arguably it is impossible to get anything useful accomplished in company with others apart from lifting heavy items of furniture.

The only *really* disturbing part of the episode I found to be the parts where Buffy's mom got dragged into the proceedings. There the multi-layered aspect of the storyline, for me anyway, swerved in very unappealing directions which spoke dire volumes about our present societal trajectory given the show's popularity with its intended audience of teenaged girls. Buffy and Mom obliquely discuss her having slept with the Angel character and

Buffy sleeping in full make-up

Mom—having no idea that Buffy is a Vampire Slayer—comes out a clear second or third best in the discussions: is, in fact, little more than a hapless bystander delegated to ask irrelevant "un-passionate" questions centred on morality that Buffy then "shoos" away as one would get rid of an annoying fly. By sleeping with Buffy and, thus, attaining a moment of bliss, Angel has recovered his soul and has become evil (re-read that sentence a few times if you're having trouble following what I find objectionable in the episode). So poor ignorant Mom is dealing on a very non-occult level with the fact that Buffy has lost her virginity to an individual Mom hadn't even known she was "dating" while Buffy is trying to shelter Mom from the more relevant occult aspects in painting Angel as a garden-variety stalker ex-boyfriend. It seems distinctly unhealthy to me to

"The emotion-based are not keen on drawing distinctions between passionate love and infatuation."

create these fictitious "Daughter Knows Best" constructs in a society where that sentiment is seldom treated as being as misguided as (it seems to me, anyway) it self-evidently is.

(According to Islamic Legend, one of the signs of the Coming of the Hour—Judgment Day—will be "that the slave-girl shall give birth to her mistress"—that is, that a woman giving birth to a

Buffy (with Calendar) doesn't want anyone to be lonely.

Angel and Buffy's mom Joyce (Kristine Sutherland): "I'll die without Buffy. She'll die without me."

daughter in the Last Days will become merely a slave-girl to her by reason of latter-day children's disrespect for their parents.)

As I say, most "chick flicks" and TV shows are at one level or another treated by their audiences as dating guides, and it seems...again, the only term that seems to fit is "unhealthy"...to create the impression that handling a stalker boyfriend or a "sex gone wrong" situation is a job best left to teenaged girls, and that the ideal solution is to make sure that the teenaged girl has a solid cover story that suits the known facts while keeping core points of relevance away from the discussion, and that the best thing Mom can do is exactly what her teenaged daughter tells her to do, because the teenaged daughter has got everything under control.

Mom: *Do you love him?*
Buffy: *I* did.

And this is just left by both of them as a trump card/last word on the subject, as if it's the most natural thing in the world—you think you love the guy, so you sleep with him, and it turns out that he wasn't who you thought he was, so all there is to do at that point is "get over it"—you loved him then, you don't now—as quickly as possible and "move on" in search of your own Mr. Giles. Just keep laying it on the line and asking nothing in return, and eventually you have to roll snake eyes with somebody, right?

And now that we've got your love life figured out, how about buying some tasty, crunchy Doritos™ to feed that empty craving inside of you?

It seems to me too clever by half and a major reason that half of North America thinks Hollywood is a great idea whose dramas can assist all us lesser non-Hollywood beings with our major life decisions, and half of North America thinks Hollywood is a cesspit where the creative individuals are so divorced from any notions of morality that no one would know a story theme suitable for teenaged girls if it came up and bit them on the ass. For liberals the theme would be considered healthy, helpful, and realistic. Teenaged girls are going to have sex, so the best thing you can do is create dramas of this kind that they can relate to (as opposed to the stodgy irrelevance they might get, say, from the family clergyman), give them a big box full of condoms when they hit puberty, demonstrate the use of one on a banana, tell them you love them, and hope for the best. Maybe after six creeps they'll find Prince Charming.

Angel: *I'll die without Buffy. She'll die without me.*
Mom: *Are you threatening her?*
Angel: *Please. Why is she doing this to me?*
Mom: *I'm calling the police. Now.*

In a world where the urge to be a drama queen is never far below the surface in teenaged girls (in no small part, I suspect, *because* of these kinds of entertainments) it seems to me that there must be a better way to sell Doritos™. Given that heightened emotions make teenaged girls (and everyone else) more susceptible to consumerist suggestions and that there is always a perceived pressing need to sell more Doritos™, I can certainly understand how the two societal imperatives can become linked, I just question the need to link them *specifically* in this case. Put another way, it seems to me that there has to be a more responsible means of generating artificial levels of anxiety in teenaged girls so sufficiently heightened as to compel them to go out and buy lots and lots of Doritos™ apart from making use of premarital-sex-and-pagan-morbidity as the means by which the selling of Doritos™ is to be accomplished. To me, these lunatic thematic extremes imply the presence of an even greater and more sinister substrata-of-intent which goes beyond moving another metric ton of Doritos™ and from which I infer that something far more odious is being "sold" in addition to those unneeded trans-fatty foodstuffs. What is being sold is, for want of a more accurate term, evil.

Passion is the source of our finest moments...the joy of love...the clarity of hatred...and the ecstasy of grief...it hurts sometimes more than we can bear...if we could live without passion maybe we'd know some kind of peace...empty rooms ...shuttered and dank. Without passion we'd be truly dead.

I would think that there would be more suitable nouns to attach to hatred than "clarity" and to attach

Mom: "Do you love him?"

to grief than "ecstasy." They smack to me of the sorts of morbid obsessions and "vapours" that used to compel otherwise healthy Victorian women to take to convalescent beds for months at a time. But, even giving the observations a free pass (which I am loathe to do), I still think we end up in distinctly unhealthy philosophical territory. There is in this concluding voice-over the eye-opening acknowledgment (or perhaps it's only me that infers it) that passion is the polar opposite of peace, and then there is the abrupt "bait-and-switch" of linking peace to shuttered and dank empty rooms and a living death as if the only alternative to hurtling through life on a roller coaster of heightened emotion is an empty room "shuttered and dank."

Surely teenaged girls are already sufficiently susceptible to these sorts of lunatic extremes of hysteria as they helter-skelter their way through life at the mercy of their monthly cycles without using that fact to sell them junk food and other needless consumer goods—not to mention selling them, as well, on inherently sordid and unsavoury rules of courtship.

Part 3: the Post-Game Show

A Mini-Debate

Craig Miller: *The theological interpretation of the title "Passion" never occurred to me. It should have, if for no other reason than that* Buffy *often touched on theological issues, and some of these have been discussed in detail in our* Spectrum *episode guides of the show. Nevertheless, your initial apprehension is understandable, since you had no way of knowing, based on what I'd said, that the episode wouldn't have been some Buffy-as-messiah exploration. After all, not wanting to give too much away about the episode in advance, I told you only that the episode dealt with themes you'd discussed in* Cerebus. *I was thinking of emotion-versus-reason, though of course the religious themes became just as important in the comic, if not more so, and there was no way for you to know what I was referring to.*

As far as your "alternate choices" to being ruled by passion (reading a book, taking tap-dancing lessons, etc.), you're being cute, but the humor avoids the foundational point. One can do all of those things as part of a passion-filled life or as part of a passionless life. Passion is not about what we do, but how we do what we do. It is about what "rules" us as we go about our lives. And when you say that the line of dialogue ("What other choice do we have?") "reinforces the misapprehension that passion is the only valid choice in life," I'm not sure you're being exactly precise, because—as noted in my introduction—the series as a whole, and this episode in particular, does indeed offer an alternative to passion, and one with a possible benefit: peace (or at least "some kind of peace"). True to Buffy's *cosmology, both options—passion and passionlessness—come with lots of undesirable baggage. While in the end the scale is tipped in favor of passion (note the sixth season as a whole, especially Whedon's own episode "Once More With Feeling"), it's not an open-and-shut case.*

Dave Sim: This is definitely a situation of me against the world. Everyone besides me accepts the fact that passion is an inherent good, and I see it as an inherent evil. It represents extreme emotion, and, to me, emotional extremes are the root of most of society's problems. Letting emotion rule your life, or, even worse, letting extreme emotions rule your life, is a very unwise choice. It was something that I learned from doing *Cerebus*, actually. Anytime I had an idea that I was passionately enthusiastic about, I'd end up doing a half-assed job because I was too ardent about it. I was trying too hard. The more I slowed down and just solved the individual creative problems in sequence and with as much patience and as devoid of emotion as I could be, the more effectively I could communicate what I wanted to communicate. I could write a book—and have, in fact, written several books—about the undesirable baggage that comes with passion, but I have yet to find any flaw in living a passionless life.

Miller: *You write, "This, it seems to me, identifies it (sorry, Craig) as a 'chick show.'" I wasn't sure if you were trying to "break the news to me." Of course* Buffy *is a "chick show." Whedon intended it as a pro-feminist series, so that pretty much guaranteed it. The surprise was that, except for some occassional heavy-handed writing (notably by Jane Espenson and sometimes even Whedon himself), the show rejected—or at least undercut—simple-minded feminism, creating a kind of anti-feminist feminism that allowed the series to be grounded in a more honest emotional reality than lockstep feminism would have permitted. The result was a chick show that was much more than a chick show and, hence, enjoyable to a wider (and, more importantly, more discriminating) audience.*

Sim: See, I would view the term "anti-feminist feminism" as a good example of what happens when you try to find a sane core in a lunatic viewpoint. It's like the term "post-feminist." In a feminist-ruled society such as we have, the term is meaningless and evasive of reality. In my view, if you have a chick kicking guys in the head as the thematic core of your entertainment, you have a lunatic extreme

"I see [passion] as an inherent evil."

of feminism, not "anti-feminist feminism." The question I think you have to ask in order to understand whether you are experiencing genuine entertainment and/or art, or feminist propaganda, is: what would this entertainment and/or art look like to a pre-1970 audience? If the answer is "nutty as a fruitcake," what you are looking at, in my view, is "lunatic extreme feminism."

Miller: *Okay, interesting point, though the "genre" of "kick-butt heroines" goes back long before the 70s. Will-*

Wonder Woman—feminist icon and general entertainment, seen here in a 1947 issue of Sensation Comics.

iam Moulton Marston's Wonder Woman (created in 1941) is the first such incarnation in comics and has long been adopted by feminists as an icon and yet has also been seen as general entertainment, not necessarily feminist propaganda.

*I actually have had an essay in mind for several years now about how the two dominant feminist cult fantasy shows of the 90s/2000s—*Buffy *and* Xena*—actually (perhaps unbeknownst to their creators) undercut some of the foundational tenets of feminism. I never got around to writing it in part because from a distance I couldn't quite figure out what the foundational tenets of feminism were. Or, more precisely, there seemed to be two contradictory streams. So which stream were the shows undercutting? I realized I needed to do a significant amount of reading of modern feminist ideology before writing the piece with any authority, and reading significant amounts of feminist anything sounded about as appealing to me as throwing myself into a live volcano—fascinating for a few seconds, then lots of pain and agony. So I never did the research or wrote the essay. Maybe I will some day.*

Sim: I suspect that your reaction to actually studying feminist writings would be the same as my own when I was researching *Mothers & Daughters*, which was, "There *is* no coherent viewpoint, unless you consider 'A woman has a right to choose whatever she wants to do in any situation, and everyone else just has to Shut! Up! and suffer the consequences if there are any—especially men. And we MEAN IT! SHUT UP!'" a coherent viewpoint.

Actually, I think a big part of the mission plan for *Following Cerebus* has always been honest exchanges of viewpoint since, as far as I can see—outside of the Intenet—this is the only venue that doesn't kowtow to the dictatorial feminist dogma encapsulated above and is actually interested in what people think even—and especially!—it those thoughts are universally disapproved of. That is, here at *Following Cerebus*, we don't shut up just because the feminists tell us to.

I hope you do write your *Buffy* and *Xena* piece someday.

Miller: *If the entirety of "passion" is represented in romance, then this episode would indeed be selling teenage girls "inherently sordid and unsavory rules of courtship," as you say in your essay. It's my belief, however—and I may very well be alone in this—that, although the specifics of "Passion" deal with romance and love, these are symbolic of larger issues of passion (suggested by the inclusion of hatred and grief in the section you quote). Isn't Angel's voiceover ultimately about passion as a driving force for life, with the object being different for every person? Tiger Woods has a passion for golf. David Lynch has a passion for filmmaking. Billy Graham has a passion for Christ. Donald Trump has a passion for capitalistic deal-making. Joss Whedon has a passion for creating good television shows. Take away these passions, and how different would these individuals be? Take away passions of every kind, and the intensity that drives them would be replaced with—what? Maybe "some kind of peace." But they would be hollow imitations of the dynamic persons they are now.*

Or maybe not. But it's something to think about.

Sim: Again, this is an example of "Dave versus the world." "Peace" as an inner peace seems like a commendable thing to pursue, and I think I've found it myself. I'm certainly a lot closer to it than I've ever been. "A kind of peace," well, you can inject yourself with heroin and find "a *kind* of peace," but I don't think it's a particularly good idea personally. Tiger Woods, David Lynch, Billy Graham, Donald Trump, and Joss Whedon may very well have the passions that you identify. That's up to them, because it's their respective souls at stake. If Tiger Woods thinks that bogeying four holes in a row at the Masters is going to serve him in better stead than prayer, fasting, and reading Scripture, I wish him luck presenting his four bogeys to God on Judgment Day as A Really Worthwhile Way to Spend Sunday Afternoon. Praying five times a day, for me, is not a passion—to me, it's the only sensible thing to do when my soul is at stake. Likewise really, really, *really* bearing down on doing what's right and not not doing what's wrong. I really like writing and drawing, and I write and draw a lot, but if you asked me to rate them alongside reading aloud from the Koran, they don't even show up at the bottom of that particular radar screen. Again, my soul is at stake, so I do what I thnk is the most beneficial thing for my soul. Passion directed at anything is, in my view, a wrong direction. I'm the only one who thinks that way, so I hope you won't let our disagreement bother you unduly. I'm just one guy, and everyone else agrees with you.

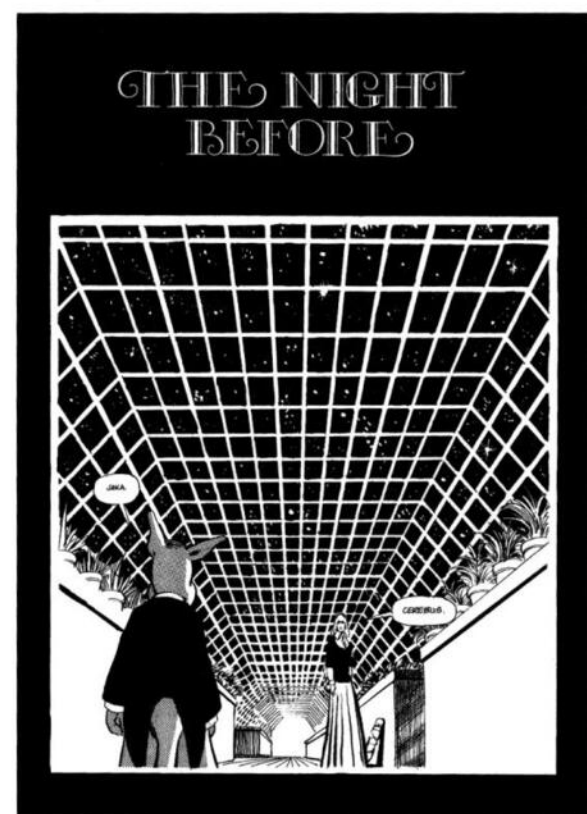
Miller: *Am I the "you." I haven't really stated a final*

position—my comment above merely suggests that the topic is worthy of ongoing consideration and debate, which puts me in disagreement with you (in which it's a settled issue, with passion as "an inherent evil"), but also in disagreement with most of "everyone else," who, I would guess, don't see it as an intriguing question, but have concluded that passion is a wonderful thing. That's what I find so fascinating about the angle "Passion" (and the Buffy *series as a whole) takes on the subject (especially considering that it's a network television series): passion has its benefits and its drawbacks, and humanity is stuck trying to negotiate through this minefield. I don't entirely agree—or disagree—with* Buffy *or with you, and if I took the time to write out my own analysis of the problem, it would probably be as individualistic as your own. But since the magazine is* Following Cerebus *and not* What Craig Thinks About Passion-Versus-Reason, *I'll let it pass the for moment.*

It's occurred to me that the shifting format of this entire Buffy *section of* Following Cerebus *is one of the reasons I like to self-publish instead of having to run everything by some editor-in-chief. You'll probably recall that this thing started out with my suggestion that you write a review of sorts. Then you proposed a dialogue instead, with my writing the set-up piece. I wrote it, but you worked on the review separately. They ended up meshing fine, but I wanted to do a follow-up essay, which became a series of endnotes, which became this dialogue. The format keeps changing as it finds (one hopes) the most effective presentation of the ideas. I like that. I can imagine an editor somewhere saying, "Look, stop all this silliness and just give me the* Buffy *review you originally pitched."*

Sim: Yes, it's a good point. I've been at this so long, I'm never fully aware of that until someone calls my attention to it. It's also, it seems to me, a direct implication of the core aspect of feminist absolutism we're discussing— "a woman's absolute right to choose" —that, like communism, only works on an individual or micro-collective basis. In any kind of hierarchical situation, it's just a recipe for disaster. As you say, with an editor-in-chief (which usually implies the presence of both an editorial board and a publisher), you just can't free-wheel this kind of decision-making. You give *me* the benefit of the doubt, and I give *you* the benefit of the doubt at each stage of the improvisation—*me* because the magazine is called *Following Cerebus* and Cerebus is my character, and *you* because it's your magazine. And of course the other principles, Ger and John, tend to defer to that structure, trusting that something interesting will result if they give us room. I can pull the plug at any point, and so can you, so not pulling the plug leads in interesting directions. If you included an editor-in-chief's "right to choose" and a publisher's "right to choose," every choice is going to close off a vast array of interesting options and kill them in the cradle. It's the reason that I don't absolutely oppose feminism and the "thinking" behind it—just the idea that, like communism, it can be applied above the individual or micro-collective-sized construct.

Miller: *Finally, in returning to passion, emotion, and—more to the point of this magazine—*Cerebus, *I have one final question.* Cerebus *contains two of the most emotionally-powerful pieces of fiction I've ever read—the early story "The Night Before," with Jaka's brief return (and the reappearance of Cerebus's sword), and, much later, in* Latter Days, *Koshie's deterioration and Moshie's taking advantage of the situation. Given your views on emotion, did you intend for these to be emotionally powerful? Were you manipulating your emotion-based audience to create a more powerful story?*

Sim: Yes, definitely. Although I certainly have chosen a passionless life for myself, as a writer you make use of the raw materials that make for the best stories and the full flowering and unleashing of pent-up narrative emotion—used with creative discrimination and carefully placed: you don't want your characters chewing the scenery in every other panel—well, there's nothing that rivals that for storytelling impact. I don't see it as *manipulating the audience* so much as *calling the audience's attention to something,* because that's my own response to extremes of emotion. Emotion welling up is a red flag signalling that something needs to be analyzed and dealt with in a completely focused and dispassionate way, but I have come to realize that most people don't see emotion that way. Cerebus' response to Jaka in "The Night Before" —and the reappearance of the sword—*should* signal to him that he has changed in a fundamental way that he wouldn't have previously approved of in his dealings with Jaka. Instead he sheds a spontaneous tear and then wanders around in a daze, which means all he has done is to postpone dealing with his relationship with Jaka as it is versus how he wants it to be. So the relationship worsens instead of improving, and he worsens instead of improving.

Dave Sim "On TV"

Interview by Craig Miller & John Thorne

FC: Twin Peaks's *co-creator Mark Frost once told us in an interview, "I think television has become like the Great Satan in our country. It's really zapping people's will to live, but that's another story!" Frost made two more forays into television; both ended badly, and now he concentrates on writing books and movies. Do you think Frost has a point?*

Sim: Well, yes—however with a number of caveats primarily centering on the term "Great Satan" which, it seems to me, has become a peculiar atheistic adoption of a fundamentalist Islamic misapprehension/ sound byte within which the atheists seem to have found common ground with the terrorists. That is, only Marxist-feminists and Islamic radicals would tend to agree that George W. Bush is the Great Satan.

By my own readings, the concept of a fully capitalized Great Satan—the name coupled with the magnifier—in Islam is restricted to *non-scriptural* biographies of the prophet Muhammad where he is a semi-recurrent figure. In the *scriptural* Koran, *God's* principle adversary is Eblis, who more closely conforms to the concept of the rebel angel who defies God's will (refusing to bow down to Adam at God's behest), whereas in the Koran the *capitalized* name "Satan" refers to *man's* spiritual adversary, and frequently the *uncapitalized* term "satan" is written in lower case form and is used pretty well interchangeably with "djinn," a kind of personal devil along the lines that Christian scriptures depict them (as in: Mary Magdalene had seven devils that needed casting out). The distinction seems critical to me particularly when you get to the point where someone like Alan Moore and the other pagan apologists have tended to adopt the view that Satan is a misrepresented amalgam of Gaia, Pan, Prometheus (or Promethea as Alan in his charming he/she/it devotional adherence would have it) and other pagan figures and deities. Distilled to its essence, this view holds that Satan is simply the victim of bad publicity and a smear campaign by the early Christian Church. Like the juvenile delinquents in *West Side Story,* Satan is *misunderstood.* My own theories centre on the fact that the scriptural YHWH conforms most clearly to the over-arching concept behind the Great Satan…*and* Eblis *and* Lucifer *and* Gaia *and* Pan *and* Prometheus (*and* Promethea as well if it comes to that) and further centre on the fact that he/she/ it portrays his, her, and itself as—and believes his, her, and itself to be—God. That is, my own theories hold that Satan/YHWH isn't misunderstood at all, but that Satan/YHWH rather, *misunderstands.*

"Television is to man what YHWH is to God."

Coincidentally, I ran across what I see as a particularly telling example of this in my Sunday Torah reading yesterday, *The Book of Isaiah* 29:16 wherein the YHWH through the prophet Isaiah chastises the Hebrew people—what the YHWH presumes to be his creations (who are actually God's creations)—for their backsliding:

Surely your turning of things vpside down shall be esteemed as the potters clay: for shall the worke say of him that made it, He made me not? Or shall the thing framed, say of him that framed it, He had no vnderstanding?

This seems astutely put and indicates what it seems to me is one of the core purposes of man being placed on the earth—to demonstrate, allegorically, to the YHWH God's own response to the manifold incarnations of the YHWH which exist in the universe by inciting that same response within the YHWH through the actions of man. That is, man is the metaphorical potter's clay relative to YHWH and YHWH is the potter's clay relative to God.

Because this exercise has been so needlessly drawn out by YHWH's unwillingness to understand what specifically is being said, the world ends up with self-perpetuating layers upon layers upon layers of the metaphor extended and re-extended and compounded and re-compounded in what would—in a more sensible context—be deemed a breaking point. How many ways can you find to tell the YHWH that he/she/it is not God?

For all of you now rolling your eyes at this intrusion of scripture into a discussion of television, we now return you to our regularly scheduled program:

Not to put too fine a point on it, but I think that television—and its precursor, movies—are technological enactments, metaphors for that same misapprehension. That is, it seems to me that in the twentieth century it became man's unhappy lot to experience, individually and collectively, what the creation of a rebel satan is like, Lucifer, the light-bringer, Prometheus, Gaia and Pan all rolled into one. In short, television is to man what YHWH is to God.

A key element to just such an *inadvertent* incarnation of this type…

(I say inadvertent because I'm quite certain the inventors of "moving pictures" did not *intend* their invention to create a medium of communication that would displace worship of God from the core

of civilized society and would likely have been appalled had they so much as suspected that it would do so)

...it seems to me is the *hypnotic* effect of light, the "making real" of the illusion that what has been effected in the creation of "moving pictures" is not just a technological trick on the order of a somewhat more intricate form of the kaleidoscope but rather that "moving pictures" represent a fundamental and critically important and useful transmutation of life into a pure light form of existence. This misapprehension is compounded by the conveyed— and largely unshakeable— impression that what is being depicted and seen is literally Larger Than Life and that therefore the depictions which result within the context of the "moving pictures" incarnation have a greater claim to the title of Reality than do individual human lives. Or, put another way, that individual human lives can only be seen as consisting of lower case reality or "reality" (who is more Real in this world, Craig Miller or Brad Pitt?). The consequence of this is the overriding sense that one's own meagre and unimportant life needs to more closely align with the Larger Than Life reality of the cinema and television in order to achieve a state more closely approximating Reality. Most atheistic and secular commentators, as an example, cite film when they are trying to make a moral or philosophical point ("It's like Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now...")*. And, of course, this had a nearly immediate and catastrophic effect on human reality most especially when it came to religious faith. The medium was very much the message. You almost never saw the characters portrayed by Humphrey Bogart or Clark Gable going to church in the movies, even though church-going was the societal norm prior to the incarnation of cinema. Ergo, church-going and faith in God quickly became "un-cool" in our society (even before we had the more clearly defined notion of what "cool" is or even the term itself) limited to crusty old marginal character actors who specialized in playing priests. Cinematic priests might have a useful word or two to say at a critical juncture in the melodrama, but it was the non-church-going Jimmy Stewart and James Cagney who actually decided the course of Real events. The effect was comparable to Clark Gable single-handedly collapsing the undershirt market when he took off his shirt in *It Happened One Night* and was seen to be bare-chested. We had no idea as mere mortals that undershirts were "un-cool". Now we know, and we'll never buy or wear another one.

(There is an element of "just desserts" here that I freely acknowledge. It seems to me that organized religion had so elevated itself above the hoi-polloi by the early twentieth century that there was no question but that the issue of religion in film had to be trod carefully around and that the easiest way to tread with optimal care was to simply choose not to address religion as a cinematic reality apart from the occasional Biblical Epic. I can't say that I would disagree that the ensuing comeuppance for organized religion of declining church attendance and declining church relevance was entirely undeserved)

So I would agree with Mr. Frost that TV is zapping people's will to live in the sense that it has largely eliminated any notion that man's core allegiance and relationship is with God and replaced it with the idea that these little radiant replications of men (and, more perniciously, women) who glow with what appears to be their own inwardly generated illumination will show us the way, whether it's on *Law and Order* or the *CBS Evening News* or (may God have mercy on us all) *Oprah Winfrey*. It is zapping not only their will to live but their will to life.

It was about four years into my investigation of scripture that I began to see all of these elements

"My primary awareness of television [is]: getting rid of it improves your life."

as self-evident and, even worse, as a clear expression of my own misapplication of free will. There was no question in my mind that my television was zapping my will to live and my will to life-is there any more purely vegetative a state than channel-surfing?-and that I had to finally face my own culpability that it was my daily, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute choice to allow it to do so. I spent about a year consciously thinking "All I have to do is to get up and walk across the room, pull out all of its plugs, carry it downstairs and put it out back of the apartment building with the trash where it belongs and I can be done with it." Knowing that elimination of television from my life was my best possible course of action relative to television as a medium and as a societal reality before I finally did so in late July of 2001 seemed significant. That's a long time to know that something is the only right course of action before taking it which, to me, points up the insidious nature of the medium and the unconscious acceptance of this over-powering and unhealthy addiction as a societal given.

Remember that I'm four-and-a-half-years removed from the decision to do without television, so I'm a very different person today than I was when I wrote "Comics and the Mass Medium." I know now, personally, what I only used to suspect. The biggest subjective difference I'm aware of is the exponential improvement in my quality of life since getting rid of my television, so that's now my primary awareness of television: getting rid of it improves your life. D.B. Little sent me a copy of *Plain Speaking,* Merle Miller's oral biography of Harry S. Truman. At one point Miller asks the President if times were better when he was a boy.

"The only thing I'm sure of: People weren't so *nervous* then. All these things people have now that are supposed to entertain them and all. They just

seem to end up by making everybody *nervous."*

Just so.

FC: *You wrote that film has become subservient to television, but what about the recent trend toward the creation of "home theatres," in which people are buying huge-screen TVs and surround-sound system for their homes? Few have been able to afford it so far (though the prices are coming down), but many more would like to have it. A few years ago* Video Watchdog *even argued that the best way to watch a movie is at home on DVD: you aren't at the mercy of a theatre's scratched film print, improperly-lit projector, or talking patrons three rows back (let alone the four-year-olds running up and down the aisles).*

DS: Well, answering your second point first, I think this illustrates clearly the malign and poisonous effect that movies have had upon us. Those four-year-olds are *real* children living in your *real* community, the patrons talking three rows back are your *real* neighbours and your *real* fellow citizens of your municipal, county, and state context. They are far more real and relevant to your life than is Jim Carrey or Jennifer Lopez or whoever has been paid millions of dollars—on the other side of the continent in the Land Common Sense Forgot—to pretend to be someone else for ninety minutes.

"We are more like Homer Simpson than Homer Simpson is."

"Glossy radiant make-believe: real. Actual people: false."

We are more like Homer Simpson than Homer Simpson is (especially when I can more easily make my point by citing Homer Simpson than an actual human being!).

Likewise expressing it as "being at the mercy" of a scratched film print and an improperly-lit projector which ranked higher in your question than did your fellow citizens and neighbours as if anything short of perfection in Light-Based Entertainments constitute a kind of unendurable torture that degrades our existence and begs a corrective measure.

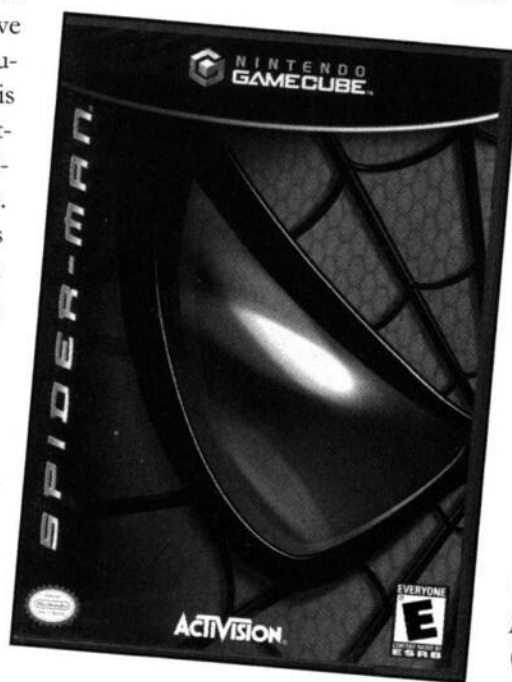
My first and only experience with wide-screen television was at the home of friends of Eddie Campbell's when I was in Australia a few years back, and they had kindly consented to put me up for a couple of days (Castle Campbell at the time being barely able to hold his burgeoning family let alone a wayward Canuck). They had a conventional-sized recreation room (perhaps 9x12) with one wall filled by a projection screen television. Since the family was gone during the day, I was welcome to put it on. It was a vertiginous experience to be watching a television with no peripheral context. There was just television and my awareness of television, which I found uncomfortably disorienting (rather than thinking "Wow—wouldn't it be great to watch the Leafs or the Blue Jays like this?" which would seem to indicate that I'm missing the hard-wiring that's required for such things to really take hold). I think there's an undefined faction of the population that has been so overcome by the context of television that they seriously desire to live inside of their televisions—television is just that real to them, and their own lives are just that unreal to them. For those individuals, the bigger the screen and the more their actual context can be eliminated, the better.

I'm an inveterate optimist since I got rid of my television, though, and I like to think that the lunatic extremes of plasma televisions and surround-sound Dolby systems that so overwhelm context will ultimately fail to convert the vast majority of the population. No matter how crystal clear and large it is, it's still just television, it isn't real. Because it isn't real, you can't live inside of it, no matter how much a part of you wants to. The key, it seems to me, is recognizing that these lunatic extremes are of a piece with all forms of escapism: you want to get away from God, and that isn't possible in any meaningful sense. The good news is that God will be right there waiting for you when you finally admit that to be the case.

FC: *Where do video games fit into the mix? For years comics had been losing ground among young readers (and let's face it, that's when most people began reading comics) to TV. Now TV is gradually losing ground to computers and computer/video games, but for the opposite reason. TV is a passive entertainment compared to reading, but reading is passive compared to video games: why read about Spider-Man's battles with Doc Ock when you can be Spider-Man fighting Doc Ock? (Part of this question is rhetorical, but I think you get the drift.)*

DS: Yes. Er—I *think* I do, anyway. I suspect that the rhetorical part comes into play when you realize that it's me that you're asking the question and—in my context—the concept of video games is exclusively a rhetorical device. I understand what they are, but there's no personal point of identification with them—their hypnotic powers are purely hypothetical, since I've never submitted myself to them

even anecdotally. I think there's a persuasive argument to be made that video games are succeeding where television is failing because of the inherent dishonesty of feminism. Whatever can be said of video games—and I think saying very little about them suits them admirably—they are at least honest. They are not trying to sell you a bill of goods. You move the joy stick, and you shoot the bad guy. A very honest cause and effect relationship. The same can't be said of feminist entertainment, which is always "selling" the inherent falsehood of gender interchangeability.

Again, I'm an inveterate optimist, and I think we are just playing out the lunatic extremes of television for the benefit of those for whom television is, indeed, Super-Reality. Why wouldn't you want to live inside of Super-Reality instead of dull, uninspired, uneventful "meatspace" if you had the choice? Why, indeed? Obviously we still have a ways to go with video-game technology-one day up ahead when we all commonly have plasma televisions and Dolby surround-sound (well, not me personally, but I think you get the drift) that eliminate context, and we have improved computer graphics that look just like actual film footage and interactive games with a whole spectrum of options so that you can star in the virtual reality film *Assault on Baghdad* alongside Brad Pitt and George Clooney, I still think the human mind will come to see it as the end of the line of a lunatic extrapolation rather than as the dawning of a Brave New World in honest communication. "This still isn't real, this is still just television." No matter how real you make it, television is false, and reality is true. It might take a hundred years from the time that television first invaded and began taking over reality for society and technology to simultaneously arrive at the conclusion that there are no further incursions possible. By then, a good ten percent of the population might well have completely and permanently disappeared into their televisions (for all intents and purposes), but it seems to me that the outcome is not in doubt. To make participation in the televised context more real, why not insert a computerized catheter, hook up a computerized colostomy bag, and introduce computerized intravenous feeding? Surely if you never have to leave your television for days on end, television will become real. As I say, I think it's an open question as to what percentage of the population will find that true, but I would be surprised if it gets anywhere close to ten percent when push comes to shove.

FC: *Actually, the rhetorical part comes in reading about Spider-Man versus "being" Spider-Man. Stories have, well, a story told through a narrative. Video games—at least the ones I've seen—don't have a story, or sometimes even a definable endpoint.*

Last week I watched for a few minutes as my fifteen-year-old stepson played Runequest *or* Something-or-other-quest. *He began explaining it to me: "I've just stolen (meaning "My character has just stolen") a shirt (or whatever it was)." The flagrant immorality of the "hero" struck me immediately, but I thought perhaps I didn't understand the point of the game, so I started asking questions:*

Me: So what happens next?

D: I can take the shirt (or whatever) and sell it to get money.

Me: So what do you do with the money?

D: I can buy weapons.

Me: And then what?

D: I become more powerful.

Me: More powerful in order to do what?

D: So that if anyone attacks me, I'll have a better chance of surviving.

Me: Okay, but what's the overall goal?

D (acting as if I'd asked the stupidest question ever): Just, y'know, to stay alive.

I'll admit to being a video game Philistine, but this doesn't qualify, in my mind, as even being a game, strictly speaking. Games have an endpoint. Football is a game, and the point is to score the most points. Chess is a game, and the point is to capture the opposing king. Whatever-quest *just seems to be a substitute for living in the real world.* Sim City *is similar—you create families who go to work or school, wash dishes, watch TV, practice the piano, wait for the plumber to come repair the sink, etc. I just wonder, why do all that on the computer when you can do that in real life?*

Even the most insipid superhero comic (or mindless sitcom) usually has some sort of point. Maybe people sitting in front of endless video games is some sort of ultimate postmodern expression, but what does it mean to you as a storyteller (or simply as a member of the human race) to have so many people preferring storyless sequential images (of which they are a participant, or at least imagine themselves to be) to coherent narratives?

DS: Well, I can't say that I take it at all personally. When your audience is less than .00001% of the North American population you learn not to think of the other 300 million people as a potential untapped audience. Can you picture someone who is entertained by the sort of video game you describe getting anything out of *Cerebus?* I certainly can't.

Just from your description it looks like a new hobbyhorse for YHWH in his/her/its endless quest

(continued on page 22)

Dave Sim on TV

by Dave Sim

Giving some thought to this TV Issue of *Following Cerebus*, I realized that we did have two videotapes of my appearances on television on the '92 Tour: network affiliate news in Atlanta and Indianapolis. At first I dismissed them mentally because they're really very short and very marginal, but then this week I started thinking that that might actually be their big selling feature—a kind of study-in-contrast/ virtual parody of Win-Mill's other publications *Wrapped in Plastic* and *Spectrum*, with their screen capture *Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman* appearances by the various stars of David Lynch's films and the genre TV series.

That is, there does seem to be something inherently amusing in the level of fame attached to a comic book even when you have a big city PR firm handling your publicity (as we did on the '92 Tour): the highest plateau to which you can rationally aspire is to be the human interest feature at the end of the local news. It's quite literally the shallow end of the gene pool of television fame, the outside edge of the TV radar screen. I can't think of anything that could be considered lower in the pecking order (guest-hosting the 5 a.m. Farm Report, maybe?). If a fire breaks out in a downtown department store, you will get bumped. That's the extent to which you're hanging on by your fingernails. Until I got used to the inherent truth of that, I used to watch for my appearances much earlier in the program. If I wasn't going to be the headline story, maybe I'd be the second or third item. Or maybe after this commercial break. No, it gradually sunk in that it was only after the news, after the sports, after the weather, that someone would say, "And finally..." and that would be me. Watch the final human interest piece on the local news, and you'll get a rough idea of what cagetory that puts you in—roller-skating squirrels, the guy who made a reproduction of the Eiffel Tower out of wooden matches, that kind of thing.

Anyway, this is what Dave Sim and *Cerebus'* level of fame is in the real world. You can see just how much information you can get across in that environment. What's even more disheartening is that to get one of these gigs is considered a coup, miles above getting the front page of the entertainment section of the local paper or a radio interview or the cover spot on the alternative weekly. I always wanted to do a really good job, because I knew that Lekas & Levine had had to fight hard for

weeks to get it for me and, in each case, I was no sooner started than I was finished. And it usually did generate a larger turnout, which is sort of mind-boggling when you see how devoid of content they are.

But then, that's television.

WAGA Channel 5 Eyewitness News in Atlanta

With Jim Axel, Amanda Davis, and Paul Ossmann

(Axel looks on as Davis conducts the interview from her anchor chair while Sim, sitting across the desk, sketches a Cerebus head.)

Amanda Davis: There are lots of aspiring writers who tackle a novel or a screenplay, but our guest has gone a little further with the concept. Since 1977, writer/cartoonist Dave Sim has been drawing an alternative epic comic creation, *Cerebus.* It's the story of a barbarian aardvark living in a mythical human community. By his estimation, Sim says completing this project will see the last episode, issue 300, hit the stands in March of the year—2004? Sounds like he's going to be busy. In fact, he's working right now. We welcome Dave Sim. So you got paper and pen in hand?

Sim: Yeah, yeah.

Davis: Why an aardvark?

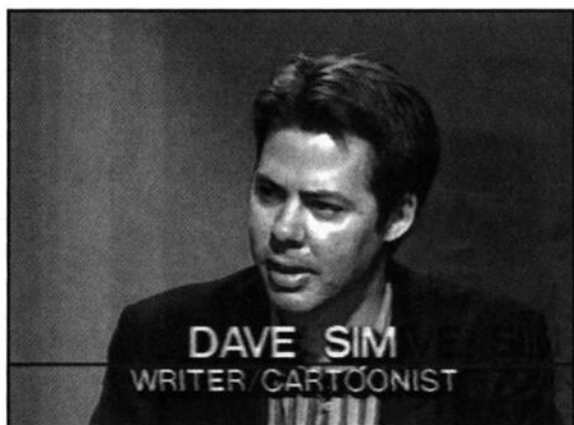
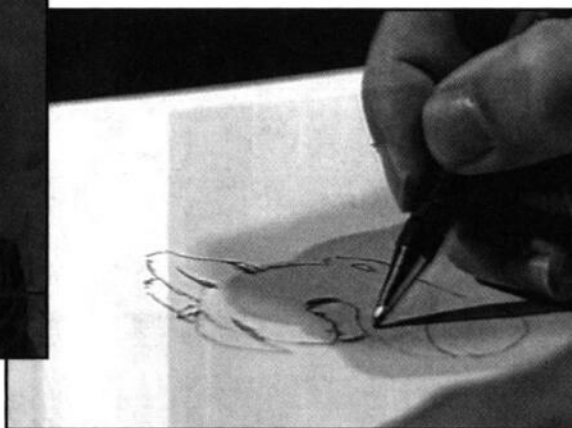
Sim: Cerebus the Squirrel sounds funny? *[Laughter]* No, it's Conan the Cimmerian, Kull the Aquilonian, Cerebus the Aardvark. It just brings people up short and makes them think, "Did I hear that right?"

Davis: What's appealing to you about doing a comic book?

Sim: I always loved comic books. I read *Superman, Batman, Spider-Man,* whatnot, when I was growing up.

Davis: Comic books appeal to the kid in all of us?

Sim: Well, it gets into your blood [for] some of us. Most people stop reading them when they're thirteen or fourteen, but I wanted to bring adult values to the comic book field.

Davis: For example, what are some of the things

Sim on Atlanta TV news in 1992 (with Amanda Davis above left)

that we see Cerebus go through in your comic?
Sim: Oh, politics, religion, you know, love—sometimes making fun of it, but most of the time I try to address things that I find interesting.
Davis: So does that mean that Cerebus came first, before A.L.F.?
Sim: Yeah. Actually, there's a few people that thought I should have sued over A.L.F. Basically, it's just one of those things that's out in the ether, I think. It was time for a funny animal, and we've outlasted them [the *A.L.F.* show].
Davis: Now you came to town to participate in a comic book convention this weekend, again proof of the interest, the large interest, in comic books today.
Sim: Particularly meeting the fans. I haven't been out on tour for ten years, and Atlanta's always been one of our best cities. It was the biggest stop on the 1982 tour.
Davis: And you've got plenty of stories in the works? You're planning through the year 2004 for Cerebus, so you'll expect he'll be around?
Sim: Well, people think that that's insane, but I figure that way I can retire at age forty-six, and you can't really complain about that too much.
Davis: No, you can't. Let's see, how much have you finished there?

Sim on Indianapolis TV news in 1992

Sim: Oh, he's coming along.
Davis: All right. Cerebus in the works. Dave Sim, thank you very much for being with us.
Jim Axel: A barbarian aardvark—?!
(Total time: approximately 2 minutes, 15 seconds)

WXIN-TV Channel 59 in Indianapolis

With Bob Donaldson and Caroline Thau
(Thau's report includes a Sim quote pre-taped during the convention.)
Bob Donaldson: Well, he may not look too imposing, but his opinions might be.
Caroline Thau: Up next, we'll introduce you to an aardvark with an attitude, and his keeper.
—
Thau: Cerebus the aardvark was in the area this weekend. The cartoon character serves as a vehicle for creator Dave Sim to explore political, historical, economic, and theological issues. Fans lined up at the Great Eastern Comic Book Convention to get autographs and share stories with Sim. Sim says he created Cerebus to bring ceredibility to comic books.
Sim: Yes, most comic books are guys in long underwear beating each other up, but there's no limit on what words and pictures together can be.
Thau: Sim says unlike many other comic book characters who do not change over the years, Cerebus does age. I didn't even know what an aardvark was!
Donaldson: Yeah, it's an anteater.
Thau: I know *now*, because the whole newsroom jumped on me! "You don't know what an aardvark is?!?"
Donaldson: Well, I have to admit I'm not familiar with the character either, but *Bloom County* has a penguin, so I guess an aardvark isn't out of the question.
(Total time: approximately 50 seconds)

(continued from page 19)
to prove that men are intrinsically evil—that "man's heart is evil from his youth." It appears to me to be YHWH's idea of a school for crime—this is how you build your crime career. First you steal material things, then you use the money to buy guns, and then you use the guns to shoot anyone who tries to take you down, and through the course of it you become more powerful. I don't think it will actually work—either as a how-to or as an underhanded scheme to brainwash young men into becoming criminals—but if I were YHWH it would seem to me that it was worth a shot; to destroy mankind by turning everyone into a gangster by means of video games and rap CDs. As I indicated earlier, I think it's more a case of feminist-centered entertainment making anything else look interesting by comparison. It's a series of direct cause-and-effect events. As your stepson said, the job is just to stay alive as long as you can, which is a pretty good description of atheistic living at its core. You're going to die eventually, so the issue becomes the purely fatalistic pursuit of entirely pointless and futile longevity. Since I see everything in terms of God vs. YHWH, it strikes me as a contention as to outcome when games become metaphors for lives which—as lives always have been—are largely repetitive, largely

"CNN and Fox [are]...riddled with emotion-based anecdotal non-stories."

pointless, and largely meaningless. "I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die," as the man in black put it. For God, I think the anticipated result of this stultifying entertainment becoming a core reality for an entire generation is that it will, ultimately, lead them back to God. God made man's mind and man's heart, and they cannot long be fooled by either feminism or video games. For YHWH I think the anticipated result is pure widespread nihilistic evil, because existence has become so pointless that even the games are pointless and that light-based entertainment can be used to turn boys to crime just as movies drove people away from organized religion.

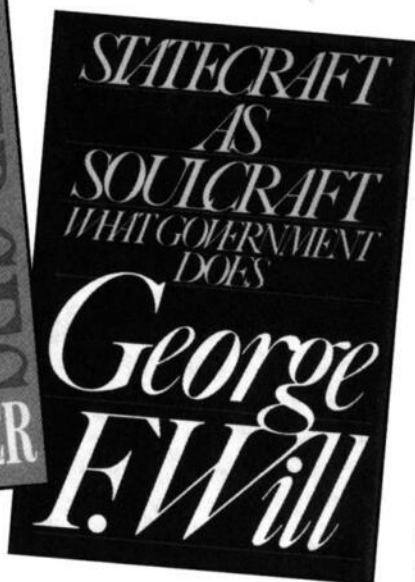
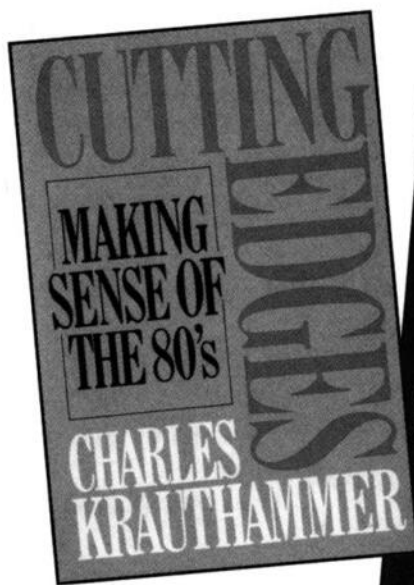
As I indicated elsewhere, I think there were intrinsic flaws in organized religion to begin with so that movies had a certain liberating effect from intellectual enslavement to the priesthood—a very different thing from turning against God Himself. Again, it seems to me that YHWH misunderstands. It isn't so much a matter of "monkey see, monkey do"—I want to become a criminal and this game will show me how—as it is a natural adherence to that which is at least factual in a world where the factual has become increasingly rare because everything is so focused upon propagating the lie of feminism. Within that context, a game that effectively mirrors the futility of life would be something of a godsend. I suspect that the use of television as the core means of feminist indoctrination has fallen on hard times with the generation of which your stepson is a member and this is YHWH's fallback position. If television isn't strong enough to turn them into little girls, then maybe it's strong enough to turn them into criminals. It's another example of YHWH's wilful ignorance. He/she/it will spend a decade or two trying to unleash young boys' "inner criminals" through video games just as he/she/it has spent thirty-five years trying to turn men into little girls through feminist entertainment. When it doesn't work YHWH is unlikely to admit defeat, to admit that human beings inherently know the difference between reality and television. He/she/it will just switch to something else as he/she/it has done for eons beyond our ability to number.

FC: *You are equally critical of computers as you are of television. Most people still get their news from TV, though more and more people are going online. Do you see this as a good, bad, or negligible development? You've been critical of the emotionalism in TV news. I assume you get your news from newspapers. Wouldn't the Internet be a more reliable resource, where one is not at the mercy of local editors and could access the entire AP story (for example) or unedited columns by, say, George Will, Charles Krauthammer, and Michael Kinsley, without hoping to have them picked up by local papers?*

DS: There's a case to be made for that. Mark Steyn had a falling out with the *National Post,* and that was it for his columns, and there went, as far as I was concerned, their best columnist. He isn't gone. He's still writing prolifically and has a website with enough pieces archived to keep me reading for months. There it seems to me is a big part of the core point—there are only so many hours in the day. I get up around 3 a.m. most days and read the *National Post* until 5. That's about as interested as I am in "Where We Are Right Now" as a Kitchenerite, as an Ontarian, as a Canadian, as a North American, as a believer in God. I'll scan the front page of *The Toronto Sun, The Globe & Mail, The Toronto Star* and *The Record* during the day if I'm out at the store to see what the Marxist-Feminists are obsessing about instead of actual news, but two hours of news and commentary seems like enough news to me. Then it's time for me to produce my own writings and pictures and do my own thinking. I don't read *The Record,* the local paper, as a habit because they are so stripped down that it is just one step up from television news:

Concept; sound byte; "quote from an expert," background; background; "quote from an expert"; dissenting viewpoint in one line; vague Marxist-feminist homily and a liberal platitude and out.

I have to say that my last experience with television news when I was in New York in November was an interesting one. I tried to watch CNN and Fox, but the coverage had been so stripped down and was so riddled with emotion-based anecdotal non-stories that I tended to flip back and forth between E! the Entertainment channel's Top Fifty Ce-

lebrity Break-Ups and C-Span where I watched Congressman Murtha's speech to the House and then checked in to see how the vote on the Congressman Murtha inspired "immediate withdrawal from Iraq" Republican motion was going to go. I would have to say that I found Congressman Murtha's speech and Top Fifty Celebrity Break-ups to have the same core emotion-based foundation, the same intention of trying to create a level of emotional anxiety for its own sake. The dichotomy between news coverage on television and the news and commentary I get in the *National Post* seems much wider than when I had a television. I assume that this is beneficial for serious-minded enterprises like the military occupation of Iraq that there's so little difference between emotional hot-button gossip shows and what passes for political opposition in the United States. Clearly unless the Democrats can compete with Top Fifty Celebrity Break-Ups in prime time, their oppositional state is apt to become a permanent one.

I'm really the same about opinions. There's just enough, and then there's too much. I read Charles Krauthammer when the *Post* prints him, and he's always worth reading, but I'm not sure I'd buy a book of his or want to spend ten hours reading all of his archived columns at his website. I gravitate to George Will if he's on the opinion page, but I've never read one of his books. And I'm far more interested when they are talking about something that happened this week rather than holding forth on something that happened back in the 60s (unless it's to make a point about something that happened this week). D.B. Little and others send me interesting stuff from the Internet including Mark Steyn's columns and theatre reviews on occasion. I enjoy them a great deal but not enough to hook myself up to the Internet. The Internet to me is a matter of "too much bathwater, not enough baby." There's no question that you can find "good baby" on the Internet—but the amount of "bathwater" you have to wade through to get to it for me, anyway, brings you quickly to a point of diminishing returns for the time invested. If I'm interested in a subject like, say, Nelson Algren, I'll go to the library and read books by him and on him which leads me to Simone de Beauvoir and books by her and on her. That seems more valuable to me than, say, entering the name "Simone de Beauvoir" into a search engine and trying to figure out which of the 987 sites devoted to her hold what I'm looking for. Again, I think it's a particular sensibility. Going to the library and looking up a book, checking the book out and bringing it home to read strike me as real events in the real world. Spending twelve hours going from Simone de Beauvoir website to website in search of information...whatever information I find is going to take a distant second place to the fact that I just spent a whole day "living inside a television." "Living inside a television" to me diminishes the value of whatever I might have found while I was in there.

I think the Internet is a good development insofar as Internet participation requires people to write and to make themselves understood, so it does tend to ameliorate some of television's previous net effects in turning potentially literate people into illiterate troglodytes. But I think that's also a temporary condition. Somewhere up ahead in the development of broadband technologies everyone (well, not me, but I think you get the drift) will have full universal worldwide television broadcast and reception capabilities. Not only will you be able to interact with five of your friends on television in real time-multiple screen images all nattering away to each other (and what will be interesting from a sociological standpoint, muting and deleting each other) you will also be able to access local television in your hometown on the other side of the continent as well as any one of the hundreds of millions of blog-cams that will be broadcasting 24/7, which technologies, I suspect, will have a deleterious and

"Charles Krauthammer...[is] always worth reading, but I'm not sure I'd buy a book of his or want to spend ten hours reading all of his archived columns at his website."

immediate effect on the newfound Internet literacy. It seems to me that for the vast majority of people you type your communications because you don't have television broadcast and reception capabilities. If you have television broadcast capabilities, why type? It's the same self-evident argument to those who would say if you have a phone why send a letter? Or why read the news when the guy on television will read it to you and show you moving pictures of it? And people who prefer to type as a means of expressing themselves will become the same tiny

minority they have been for some time and the illiterate troglodytes of the late seventies will stage a big comeback. Educators will long for that Golden Age of the early twenty-first century when literacy was becoming universal because of the broadcast limitations of the Internet. I don't think it will be a very happy reality but it will be a universal one: Absolute Movies and Absolute Television with the technology to produce them both available to everyone on the planet for less than a hundred dollars-film-editing, slow motion, voice over, the complete spectrum of ILD special effects-all of cinema's limited palette of storytelling techniques will be just as available to Aunt Sophie for her niece's third birthday party as they are to Martin Scorcese. It will, I think, ultimately lead to the inescapable conclusion that movies and television are what they have always been: technical trickery devoid of content and the further conclusion that technical trickery is a poor replacement for honest and fruitful communication. Of course it could take a hundred uncomfortable years for that conclusion to be arrived at.

FC: *I can't find the quote from your work—I'm sure I read it somewhere—but I'm going to throw this in anyway: is television an inherently emotion-based medium whose programs must champion emotionalism in order to be wildly commercially successful?*

DS: My view would be "Yes, definitely." In the same way that music is in the same boat. Maximum emotion, minimum content. After all, what was the big plus with movies in their early years that allowed them to so effortlessly displace religion as the core of society? It certainly wasn't the content. Arguably they "felt" right—going to the "moving pictures" made you feel good. There was an emotional "up" to be had from going to "see" Gloria Swanson at the "moving picture house" magnified many times actual size and to follow along on her emotional roller coaster (whatever it happened to be—and who today could remember or be bothered to look up the plot of a Gloria Swanson film prior to *Sunset Boulevard?*) for eighty-five minutes and then to read all about her "real" life in film magazines. Contrast that with listening to the liturgical sermon at church on Sunday. The priest or minister was neither as attractive as Gloria Swanson nor did he seem to cast his own radiant glow as she did. He talked about morals and right behaviour, and there was no interesting emotional roller coaster of passion becoming fear becoming despair becoming hope becoming happiness. The avid church and movie-goer would have suspected that the priest or minister would probably have bored Miss Swanson to distraction had they occasion to meet. He didn't seem her type.

"Even so-called Reality TV is far more about moving civilians from their civilian context into the Super Reality that television traffics in."

Television is just an extrapolation of that, reinforcing the viewpoint that emotions on full naked display are inherently valuable in a way that attempting to behave correctly—to do the right thing—can only dream of matching for level of interest in the general population. It was you, Craig, who pointed out to me that movie and television reviews no longer address the content of the shows as communication vehicles. If the star of your favourite show is interviewed on television, the show will only be discussed in passing in favour of the star's personal life, the star's last project before the show and the star's next project after the show. The societal bargain has shifted on the part of the audience from observers of the fabrication to investing themselves emotionally in the personal lives of the stars featured in the fabrication. No one cares what Jennifer Anniston's latest film is ostensibly about compared with whether or not she's gotten Brad Pitt out of her system or who she's sleeping with now or which potential partner she's apt to be making a film with next. There was an interesting emotion-based female moment in the Arts & Life section of *The Post* with a woman admitting that she's "not speaking to Brad Pitt"—that is, she's not going to his movies because of what he "did" to Jennifer Anniston, and she's going to Jennifer Anniston's films as a gesture of solidarity even though the films don't interest her personally. I'm sure that's pretty common, even though it's a lunatic extreme of emotion-based living. Emotion R Us.

Even so-called Reality TV is far more about moving civilians from their civilian context into the Super Reality that television traffics in—making them into Larger Than Life light-based constructs in whose emotional lives we are expected to invest our own emotions (well, not me, but I think you get my drift)—than it is about bringing television into proximity to the real world we lesser beings function within.

"Wildly commercially successful" is also becoming a relative term in an environment where the audience is fragmenting so quickly and irrevocably. When we reach the point where a kid in his basement can potentially reach the same audience as CBS at a fraction of the expense and with the same palette of technical ability I think we will have crossed a Rubicon of sorts which will indicate the extent to which television's success has previously hinged on it being perceived to have a universal *communal* importance. If everyone is watching different shows, do they still have the same emotional investment in those shows that you and I did when we were all-however-many-million-of-us-watching Barbara Eden on *I Dream of Jeanie* at the same time on the same night of the week?

As a rare television viewer these days—only when I'm staying in a hotel somewhere—I'd say the

biggest contrast between pre-9/11 television and post-9/11 television is the panicky edge that the latter has to it. All of the news anchors look as if they are barely able to keep themselves from foaming at the mouth. They're talking much faster, much louder, and their eyes have the distinct glint of madness to them. I think this might be a mixture of equal parts: panic that the liberal agenda that most of them are propagating is in jeopardy coupled with the sense that being on television doesn't insulate them from genuine realities like a lack of job security as it once did ("I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not."). The more channels, the less likely someone either at the executive level or in the audience cares if you're sitting in that chair come Monday. And as with any relationship, the more obvious your need for emotional engagement the less likely you are to get it. The audience is, I suspect, disengaging from emotional investment in television professionals—as opposed to television personalities—because there are just too many of them to keep track of and, thus, care about. There is less reverence than ridicule to television professional and personality coverage nowadays. They are seen less as radiant beings and more as mundane obsessive careerists. I suspect the actual "stars" may soon come to be viewed in the same way.

I apologize that that's all kind of long-winded relative to your question. I'd say the short answer is "Yes"—beginning with the early days of movies the thing that movies and television have always had going for them is emotional investment and, consequently, will always have an emotional primacy as the basis of what they are selling, making the audience feel good about itself collectively and individually. I think that's going to be a far more difficult trick to master when half of the audience only feels good when you are selling them on the misapprehensions of feminism as is the case now. Right now both halves of the audience buy into that viewpoint—the women because they have a pressing emotional desire to believe the genders are interchangeable, and the men because they know that they have to toe the feminist party line if they want to get laid. But reality is seldom determined by what makes an audience feel good. The radio audiences of the 1930s felt good when they were told that Hitler could be appeased and war avoided but as good as it made them feel—and it made them feel very good indeed—that viewpoint couldn't be sustained over the long term because it wasn't real. Emotions are emotions and reality is reality. Television by its nature has more to do—and will always have more to do, I suspect—with the former than with the latter.

FC: *Many years ago, when you talked about making an animated Cerebus movie "without a single heartwarming moment," were you serious (if a production company would have financed it) or were you always joking?*

DS: I was very serious at the time, but I knew that I would never find a production company willing to finance an animated cartoon without a single heartwarming moment, so I had intended to basically build as much of an animated film as I could before approaching someone. "This is the film that I want made, are you in or out?" The idea was that I would start with *The Animated Portfolio* and use the profits from that to buy the time to storyboard the film and find a way to market the storyboards so that I could move onto the next stage. That is, each stage of the film would be financed by selling reproductions of the raw materials to the *Cerebus* audience. As it turned out the portfolio didn't sell as quickly as I thought it would (to say the least!) and consequently, instead of financing the film it became a drain on the publishing company's finances. By the time that we had finally sold all of the portfolios, I discovered that my interest in animation had been satisfied by doing the portfolio. I had been very, very keen to do the three segments in the portfolio in a pure animation style but I had no interest in storyboarding a whole animated film, which would have been the next stage. Since an animated film would have necessarily been an uphill fight all the way—against an animation studio, against a film distributor or a television network—there was no way I could get anywhere if I wasn't even interested in the *fun* creative parts of the job. And, as I say, I just wasn't interested when it was time to move to the next level. I was kind of happy about that, actually, in the same way that I was happy on the two occasions in my life when I overcame my comic-book collecting addiction.

One less mouth to feed is one less mouth to feed.

A plate from the Animated Cerebus Portfolio

When we think of great television columnists, one name comes immediately to mind: Lee Sandlin. (Okay, that's not quite true; we also think of Harlan Ellison.) How could we produce a TV-themed issue without inviting Lee to participate? (He's not a comics guy at all, but he appeared in FC 3, which was enough of a connection for us.) Unfortunately, Lee hasn't written about TV for years—he hates it more now than he did back in 1994, which is when the following column first appeared in the July 29 issue of The Chicago Reader. *Nevertheless, we think you'll find this piece not only hilarious, but still relevant. For more of Lee's work, go to leesandlin.com. Enjoy!*

Automatic Pilot

by Lee Sandlin

I have two theories about the way TV shows are made. I also have two theories about the way baby food is made. They're the same two theories. In the first theory, the manufacturers start with wholesome and natural ingredients, which they proceed to blast, bleach, irradiate, colorize, and strain until the result is bland, featureless ooze. In the second theory, they do much the same thing with the same result, but they start with toxic waste.

The first theory is more romantic—at least as far as TV goes; I don't suppose anything about baby food is romantic. It suggests that there really are original talents at work in TV, whose creative spirit is ruthlessly stomped on by the hordes of zombies who infest the networks. I used to believe this theory. After all, it's what the talents themselves always said when excusing the dreadfulness of their shows. But you'd figure that sooner or later some of their original wholesome naturalness might contaminate the system and get on the air maybe by accident, and I'm still waiting for that to happen. So I've now come around to the second theory. There are no great works of TV art that have been turned, by the committee system, into bad TV shows; instead, all TV shows begin life as poisonous dreck, but they have been processed by the networks to the point where, by the time they're broadcast, they're almost innocuous. If you don't believe me, the best way to test this theory out is to watch the pilot episode of a series. It's always a shock, especially if it's a show that lasted

"The most interesting pilots are for series that don't get on the air."

for years, to see how jumbled and awkward the first episode invariably was—and how slavishly it was imitating some other successful show. This is what's so fascinating: all the elements that ultimately would be homogenized into paste are still raw and available for your inspection.

You might have supposed, for instance, that the old classic *Barney Miller* was born out of an acute case of agoraphobia. It confined itself obsessively to that dingy police squadroom for years at a time—but the pilot, I once was startled to discover, was for a standard home-bound sitcom about a cop's family life. Barney's scenes in the squadroom were nothing more than local color, added to give the domestic tripe a little gloss of originality: but soon enough, as happens with every good TV show, the gloss became the whole point. Another big surprise was the pilot for *Murphy Brown:* not only was the script nothing more than a bad update of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (with a kitschy veneer of feminist consciousness), I couldn't begin to measure the depth of Candice Bergen's stage fright. She recited every line as though praying for the camera to be turned off so she could bolt. After years of heavy-duty industrial processing, she has gotten better, or at least less tense—but the pilot did explain why, even now, everyone else on the set acts a little dazed by her.

"Green Acres...*was [actually] about...an interminable guerrilla war between Alice and Wonderland."*

But the most interesting pilots are for series that don't get on the air. It might be news to you that there are any—that there's any selection process at all. But the networks are constantly commissioning scripts for new series, and they shoot far more pilots than they ever schedule. Many of the also-rans do get shown on the air once, to fill holes in the program grid when the supply of regular product is running low. We are right now in prime unsold-pilot season, what with everything being in reruns except for *Models Inc.* (which only feels like it's a rerun) and *The People Vs. O.J.* (which is temporarily on hiatus). Here and there throughout the grid, in between the evidentiary hearings, unsold pilots have been popping up for the last few weeks on all the networks. I recommend watching one, no matter what it is. It'll be terrible—I guarantee that—but it'll tell you more about how TV works than a year's worth of Nick at Night.

You have to look sharp to find an unsold pilot, though, because they're never hyped, and they look just like regular shows—with their own little title sequence and theme music and everything. The

giveaways are: you've never heard of it; the star is somebody you dimly remember being a costar somewhere else; the plot is a senseless garble of five other series already on the air; and the listing in *TV Guide* ends with the sinister phrase, "Not on the network's announced fall schedule." That means: a turkey.

I came across one a few weeks ago on Fox. It was called *Locals:* a sitcom starring John Ratzenberger, who used to be Cliff the mailman on *Cheers.* It was everything an unsold pilot ought to be: that is, it was so bad it was unearthly. Nothing about it made any sense; all the jokes were bizarre and none of them were funny; the characters didn't resemble any known form of human life. And yet everything about it was familiar. It had been recycled wholly out of byproducts from other TV shows—it was so toxic only because it hadn't been processed enough, and the stench of industrial effluvia rose off the screen.

The setting was a small town described as "the rake capital of the world." Everybody in the town used lawn rakes as a medium of exchange—as currency, as engagement presents, as dueling weapons. I missed the rationale for this: whether there was a rake factory nearby, or this was some demographic fluke, or whether the aliens who made the show had been palling around with David Lynch for too long. Most likely, this was one of those typical American towns that are continually beset by surreal anomalies—a wacky place where the monks of the local monastery (and most small towns do have a local monastery) didn't make wine but instead raised attack dogs, which they were unable to control because they'd taken a vow of silence.

Anyway, Ratzenberger played the local barber, a la Floyd from Mayberry. He was also the narrator—which, given Ratzenberger's perpetual air of eerie joviality, was like watching the stage manager from *Our Town* overdosing on Halcion. The pilot's story was a measure of how much comic invention had really gone into the show: a stranger arrives in town. I'm pretty sure he was a stranger, and not a mirage or a hologram or something. But get this: he was a typical New York City cab driver! (Actually not so typical, since he was from Brooklyn rather than the Tunisian outback.) You can just imagine the comical reactions he had to the townspeople!

I'll spare you what followed—it was so bleak the producers really should have replaced the laugh track with the wails and groans of damned souls. The pit of Hell finally yawned in the concluding moments, when the script (sensing, perhaps, that the executive screening room at Fox had emptied out) underwent a seizure of nihilistic self-loathing. Behind the credits, the cabdriver and somebody else attacked each other like rabid wolves, while the other characters, trapped within the dwindling reality of the town, became aware of the existence of the camera and desperately tried to horn in on the barber's last soliloquy.

"*[Locals]* was so bleak the producers really should have replaced the laugh track with the wails and groans of damned souls."

You will not be surprised to hear that *Locals* is not on Fox's announced fall schedule. I'm glad I saw it, though, because it did convince me of one great truth: TV series are much harder to make than I'd ever dreamed. I'm now willing to look more charitably on the most balefully meaningless sitcoms on TV: shows like *Growing Pains*, or *The Facts of Life*—the sitcoms that make you feel that some kind of evil telepathic force is wiping your mind as clean as a.suburban kitchen floor. They clearly represent an enormously high degree of craftsmanship, which should be respected. After all, the people responsible for *Locals* were professional writers and producers, and it's not as though John Ratzenberger has no talent: and yet they took all the materials for a TV show and contrived a nightmare instead.

"Nothing supernatural happened on Cheers, *for instance—except that...nobody was as much as tipsy by closing time. So what kind of booze did they serve there, and why did anyone ever order another round?"*

How did they go so wrong? Consider their starting point: that eternal TV theme, the cynical New Yorker confronted by smalltown American goodness. It seems to have struck the writers that those kinds of shows are really about something else. Think of *Northern Exposure* and *Twin Peaks* and *Newhart;* in fact go all the way back to *Green Acres.* In each case, the small town turns out to be a goofy, dreamlike realm, a kind of parallel world designed by Norman Rockwell and Andre Breton. Flying saucers and monsters wander around loose in Twin Peaks; Napoleon and Franz Kafka visit Cicely, Alaska; the backwoodsmen of *Newhart's* Vermont all have the same name and speak with inexplicable Southern

accents; the universe of *Green Acres* is as squashy as a Dali watch. In this world, the tough-guy cynicism of New York comes to symbolize something closer to Cartesian rationalism. The exiled New Yorker soon stops arguing the merits of "Fresh Air!" versus "Times Square!" and instead spends every episode trying to prove to the non-Euclidean townspeople that effect really does follow cause and the world isn't a solipsistic illusion.

Locals tried to follow in this tradition of surrealist whimsy. But what the producers ignored was that every one of those shows, however phantasmal it shortly became, was, in its pilot episode, dully and painfully naturalistic. An intricate chain of highly circumstantial pretexts led Dr. Fleischman to Alaska, all of which the *Northern Exposure* pilot patiently went over several times—I wasn't paying any attention, so I don't remember what they were, but other people in the audience were presumably reassured. Even *Green Acres* actually tried to pretend for a few episodes that it was about a New York lawyer moving out to a run-down farm, rather than an interminable guerrilla war between Alice and Wonderland. But what was the cabbie doing there in *Locals?* Why, because the town waitress had impulsively married the first man she met in New York—an explanation only plausible if she'd been cursed by a witch.

Almost every successful TV show is built around that same pattern: a halfway plausible premise that only gradually falls away to reveal a fairy tale form underneath. Some shows do it so well you don't even notice how they've drifted into dreamland. Nothing supernatural happened on *Cheers,* for instance—except that, as the weeks and the years went by, nobody at the bar ever got belligerently drunk, or sick, or maudlin; nobody once had to call the cops to break up a fight; in fact, nobody was as much as tipsy by closing time. So what kind of booze did they serve there, and why did anyone ever order another round? The truth was, Cheers wasn't a bar at all—it was another outpost of Fantasy Island, the magic place where everybody knows your name.

When a show has to introduce its real premise so patiently and insinuatingly as all that, then obviously the last thing *Locals* should have done is leap headlong into weirdness. It should have spent half a season pretending to be a 90's version of *Mayberry R.F.D.* before even mentioning those rakes and that monastery. They should have taken a lesson from the strangest fairy tale on the schedule: *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.*

"It's as though, in some ultimate, Platonic, TV version of reality, *Gunsmoke* and *Twin Peaks* were the same show."

Here is a show with a premise so fantastic it makes *Locals* look like socialist realism: that a 19th-century female doctor, somehow converted to New Age holistic medicine (by a passing time-traveler, no doubt) could practice her occult doctrines on the inhabitants of a frontier town and not get burned as a witch for her pains. Yet it feels so grounded in tradition it's almost plausible. Even if you think Jane Seymour as Dr. Quinn is an apparition spontaneously generated by *People* magazine, you catch yourself thinking that surely the town is...well, not realistic, exactly, but maybe the American past did contain squeaky-clean villages like this one, where the locals were all soft-spoken and polite and willing to listen to reason when it was explained to them very slowly. And, in a way, it's true—the town isn't out of the real past, but the televised past. It's the town we've seen all our lives in *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza* and *Little House in the Prairie.*

Dr. Quinn discreetly situates itself in this Old West Brigadoon—a phantom place that somehow persisted through decades when no one made western shows anymore, patiently waiting and available for anyone who would want to use it again. It has survived because it's got nothing to do with the past: it's designed to be a little allegory of the present, as open to holistic medicine as it used to be to debates about civil rights. It's America in its schematic form: a civics-class outline of a community, where archetypical figures—doctor, mayor, sheriff, judge—can enact uplifting dramas about current issues. The western gear is really just for show, so the town doesn't appear to age. You could do without: in fact *Picket Fences* is set in the exact same town, only in modern dress.

The odd thing—in fact, it's downright sinister—is that in all other respects Rome, Wisconsin in *Picket Fences* is located in the same surrealist domain as Cicely, Alaska and Hooterville, Twilight Zone. The closer you look at them, the more that TV small towns blur into each other: it's as though, in some ultimate, Platonic, TV version of reality, *Gunsmoke* and *Twin Peaks* were the same show. That's a scary prospect to contemplate: maybe TV isn't getting more murkily diverse, as the channels continue to multiply; maybe the secret, cumulative effect of the industrial processing is to make all TV shows converge on one archetypical situation. After all, every family sitcom seems to be about the same blandly mean-spirited family; every cop show is about the same infallible, angelic cop—what if the entire programming schedule were gradually contracting to one show about a weird and timeless town in fairyland, with characters and plots recycled from a thousand other series and populated by actors we know exclusively from reruns?

The show is *Locals,* in other words. It seemed so peculiar only because it was ahead of its time. Maybe it's not on the announced schedule, but it's our one true destination.

within *Cerebus* are spectacular, especially given that every chapter has gone unrevised since its initial publication," and I'm described as "a shockingly gifted cartoonist, one of the most innovative storytellers in the history of his medium…[he] routinely pulls off technical feats that no other cartoonist would dare." Of course, it's also noted that "Sim's reputation as a world-class jerk tends to overshadow his actual work" which—given the exalted heights of praise in which the writer, Douglas Wolk clearly felt himself compelled to indulge as regards that work (I would tend to agree with Peter Straub)—would seem to require a "world-class-jerkiness" of virtually Hitlerian proportions to overshadow.

"I was wondering if he's actually a fan and he's just *pretending* to be the outraged feminist because he knew that was the only way he could get the piece published," I suggested to Peter. He grasped immediately what I was saying—if it takes kicking Dave in the nuts a bunch of times, at least someone can officially go on record as saying the work itself is as good as Wolk believes it to be.

Peter didn't think so. Pushed to the wall, I didn't think so either—but there was still the inexplicable appearance of the piece itself a mere year-and-a-half since the end of the book. There seemed to be no accounting for the excessive praise in our present degraded and feminist-dominated political context. Was it even possible in the deepest sanctuaries of feminist delusion to believe that someone could be simultaneously Rembrandt and Hitler?

I did find parts of the review helpful in understanding that degraded, feminist-dominated political context more fully when Wolk writes of Rick:

In his later years, he's delusional, interpreting everything in his environment—a bar, a chair, a woman who flirts with him—as a religious portent. The "holy book" he writes is the work of a hopeless, obsessive schizophrenic. He is also, as it happens, the true prophet of God. In order for the final sections of the series to make sense, you have to believe both of those things at once—which goes beyond willing suspension of disbelief and into a deeply uncomfortable realm. That way lies madness. That's the idea.

It's hard not to smile with deep sympathy in reading those words and to see in them the flailing desperation of an atheist drowning in his own atheism. It's entirely true that once you understand that the world was created by God and that we are all His creations, everything in your environment—a bar, a chair, a woman flirting with you—is a religious portent in the sense that each needs to be responded to in a manner which establishes by the choice of response a clear demarcation between "0" and "1"—"Not God" and "God"—which is up to each individual to decide with his soul at stake in the cumulative decision-making involved. It must be difficult enough for Wolk, an avowed atheist, living in *uber*-feminist Portland, Oregon to keep track of where the "right" restaurants are and what specific brand and vintage of wine you're supposed to drink with which meal while working on his book (well, more of a book *proposal,* he admits in the Contributors' section) without thinking that his soul might be at stake when he finds a woman flirting with him—and that wine, itself, might be a bad idea no matter what the brand or its ability to complement a given dish. Madness, indeed. Bringing his magazine piece in for a shaky landing, he writes

Which brings us back to the aesthetics vs. politics problem. It's comforting to see first-rate art that's compatible with one's own political views; but to see first-rate art that's violently opposed to one's own political views is necessary. If your sympathies are even vaguely secular or liberal—if, that is, you're reading The Believer, *whose title Sim would probably find bitterly amusing—then the second half of* Cerebus *is an attack on* you. *It demands a response in the reader's mind, and if you can see past "what a* total dick" *you're likely to come out of it with your own thoughts about gender, power, and the nature of creation (with both a large and small C) clarified.*

Again, the smile is more one of deep sympathy than bitter amusement. The avowed *raison d'etre* of the magazine is to frame—through print-dialogue and print-debate—the core beliefs of secular humanists. The cover copy includes "*Three days with the experts and megaexperts at a self-help writers' conference in Atlanta reveals our fundamental need for soul-penetrating, heart-touching (and maddeningly unhateable) stories.*" It seems to me that there is one thing of which we can be certain: that the crushing burden of self-determination compels secular humanists to coin new terminology like "megaexperts" and "unhateable." The cover also avows that *"J.P. Donleavy's male protagonists mostly just eat, drink and have a lot of sex. But they're still worth reading about because Donleavy is such a genius at describing food and sex (and himself)."* The cover also depicts Mark Mothersbaugh in full 80s Devo regalia.

I rest my case, your honour.

Still all real intellectual and spiritual progress is incremental in its nature. In the cover copy for Wolk's piece (headlined "6,000 pages of misogyny and a hermaphroditic aardvark"), Wolk's own assertion that "Art that's violently opposed one's views, however—such as Dave Sim's masterpiece, Cerebus is necessary" has had its end-note noun changed to "essential": a gradation of slightly more imperative nuance? It's probably just the long-dormant optimist within me.

Peter turned up a copy of the magazine itself for me and for the Cerebus Archive just in time for my wonderful home-cooked dinner with him and his wife Susan in their spectacular brownstone just off Central Park West in mid-town Manhattan. My first reaction to the piece in photo copy form had been "Wow. A *Tony Millionaire* Cerebus." To that was now added "Wow. A *Charles Burns* Cerebus."

Hitler or Rembrandt: once a fanboy always a fanboy.

Who Reviews the Reviewers?

By Dave Sim

It came as something of a surprise when word circulated in late September of last year that *Cerebus* had been reviewed in a mainstream magazine called *The Believer.* I was in no hurry to read the piece since mainstream magazines are completely in thrall to feminism and consequently bound to make vilification of *Cerebus* (and me) the core of their coverage. It did, however, seem oddly premature. My best guess had been that the publication of issue 300—having passed largely without comment and the lack of comment having passed largely without consequence—that the feminists would have elected to entrench within their universally favoured high-school-cheerleader-clique approach to intellectual debate and to maintain a "zero tolerance" level of ostracism of the book (and myself) for a period of some years if not decades leaving it to their guerrilla bands of the Internet to continue laying the groundwork of the "Dave Sim is insane" retrenchment of intellectually vacuous but largely effective quasi-rebuttal.

Peter Straub mailed me a copy of the piece, asking me in his cover note to phone him to discuss it when I had "absorbed it." I phoned him a few days later and basically said that—given that I was widely believed to be clinically insane—it really wasn't relevant what I thought of the piece. As a member-in-good-standing of the 21st century mainstream (a *New York Times* bestselling author who knows Stephen King and Neil Gaiman personally), however, I was interested in what *he* had thought of the piece and what, in *his* view, the journalist in question was attempting to express.

"Well," he said, thoughtful as always before giving an assessment, "I thought what he was, in effect, saying was 'What if—instead of being a miserable failure as a painter—Hitler had been a painter with the abilities of a Rembrandt.'"

It was an interesting and succinct way of putting it (something Peter excels at which was why I had asked). Indeed even a cursory examination of the article reveals such references as "an absolute masterpiece" (in the subhead), "one of the most ambitious and fully realized narratives of the past century" "a novel of (very big) ideas" "a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of word and image and idea" [I have no idea what the dictionary-definition of *Gesamtkunstwerk* might be, but from the context, I'll take it as a "plus"] "the *Birth of a Nation* of comics" and asserts that "The formal symmetries and echoes

Dave Sim: "Wow! A Tony Millionaire Cerebus!" His enthusiasm is matched a few weeks later by "Wow! A Charles Burns Cerebus!"

About Last Issue

by Dave Sim

About Last Issue's "About Last Issue"

Owing to the editorial equivalent of a wardrobe malfunction, the beginning of the Neil Gaiman interview from issue 5 that was supposed to appear in issue 6's "About Last Issue" didn't. So this marks the first time that I'm having occasion to write an "About Last Issue" about last issue's "About Last Issue" which should appeal to all the surrealists in the crowd:

Gaiman: Mikey just graduated from university and he's a computer scientist and I no longer speak his language.
Sim: [laughs]
Gaiman: I mean, quite literally, he'll be explaining to me what it is that he does and I start feeling that time has passed me by, as if I'm of another generation. I smile and I nod and I say, "That's nice, darling."
Sim: *Yeah, you're not alone in that. Anybody who isn't actually immersed in computers—the terminology itself is evolving into a different language. I mean, you have some awareness of computers—*
Gaiman: *Some* awareness of them, but I use them as an object. At the end of the day, for me, they're objects. We have them these days instead of typewriters, and I can make them work because I've been using them for twenty years. But with Mikey, he's now going off into post-graduate work and PhD stuff. He's got Brown University paying him to do research into computer languages, which means…nothing to me. All I know is that it's mysterious stuff that happens "under the hood."
Sim: *Sometimes the apple does fall far from the tree.*
Gaiman: Sometimes it does. And I'm pleased he did. I'm pleased that he's got his own sort of identity which is very different from me.
Sim: *No question about that.*

The Comics World of 1977

Buddy Saunders makes a good point that there weren't many comic book stores *per se* prior to Phil Seuling starting up Sea Gate Distribution in '73. The only two exceptions I could come up with would be Now & Then Books and Captain George's Memory Lane. In both cases, although comic books dominated the environment, there were a lot of other items being sold, including (in the former case) science fiction paperbacks, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines, and (in the latter case) movie posters, stills, lobby cards, and assorted memorabilia. Whatever store George Henderson had owned previously on Queen Street in Toronto had been primarily centered on used books. It was only when he displayed a few comic books around the time that the Batman TV show debuted in 1966 that he discovered a vast untapped market.

The Many Origins of Cerebus

I. The Comics World of 1977

I think every comics retailer started catching onto the trick of shopping at the local news agents around the same time. I remember going out to Kitchener News with Harry and Max Southall when Harry started buying direct from them on the same basis—as a means of supplementing supplies of books that looked like they might be "hot." Selling comic books for full cover price proved an irresistible temptation for the news companies and, I suspect, hastened the demise of the ID's as the primary comic book outlets. As soon as everyone realized that Now & Then Books was the only place you could get first issues of Atlas Comics, as an example, that eliminated the newsstands as an option.

Neal Adams has an interesting theory on the collapse of the IDs along the same lines. The Renaissance of the early 1970s that we all remember so fondly—*Green Lantern/Green Arrow, Swamp Thing, The Shadow, Conan,* etc. coincided with the first experiments with comic store owners buying direct from ID distributors who were selling hot books to them, hot books that got categorized as unsold under a system called Affidavit Returns where the distributors were on an honour system to report what was sold and what wasn't and had discovered that they could sell a certain number of titles on a non-returnable basis for more than they were making on the comic books they were racking and then reported those books as unsold thus guaranteeing their own short-term profitability. It would certainly go a long way towards explaining how it was that the best books of the early 1970s were always cancelled due to low sales and were also difficult if not impossible to find on newsstands.

Cerebus Faces the Competition

It all begins to tie together in a strange and perverse sort of way. Because Neal Adams and Barry Smith and Mike Kaluta and Berni Wrightson and those guys were always working on books that had the lowest *reported* sales (but which, so the theory goes, were actually selling at a faster rate through illicit channels), their titles got cancelled and they were forced to find work elsewhere (Warren Publishing, prints, Hollywood, advertising) which led to the condition Craig describes in this section: "the comic-book market of the late seventies has a reputation—completely deserved—as one of the worst

periods for good comics." The fact that the illicit sales didn't show up on the books reinforced the viewpoint that quality didn't sell and that all that did sell was second-rate material because only the second-rate material was making it to the newsstands. It also led to peculiar ancillary beliefs such as the one that no one bought Neal Adams-drawn comic books but they bought comic books with Neal Adams covers. Because the covers were on books that contained second-rate material, they actually made it to the newsstands, unlike *Batman, Green Lantern/Green Arrow, X-Men, Avengers,* and the other titles that Neal Adams was actually drawing.

It also meant that a guy like myself who was basically a fan artist could find a space in the market once an entire generation of top talent had been driven away by the perception that their work wasn't commercially viable. It would also explain why John Buscema's *Conan* outsold BWS's *Conan* by a wide margin. Buscema's *Conan* made it to the newsstands. BWS's *Conan* didn't.

It's just a theory, but it's an interesting one.

Chuck Rozanski

I had gone downstairs early for the dealer set-up at the November *Big Apple National* show in New York City and spied a familiar figure crouched over a long box of comics. As I said to his back, "All that turquoise and a ponytail that long it can only be one guy." He did a slow turn and then broke out in a smile when he saw who it was. We had a nice long chat and I thanked him for his participation in last issue (which I hadn't seen at that point) and told him I would be running the attached photo here in the "About Last Issue" section. I remembered Rowen's name from Deni's and my stay with the Rozanskis on the '82 Tour, but I couldn't remember the name of the baby (now a twenty-three year old).

The Rozanski family at home in November of 1982, from left to right, Rowen, Chuck and Nanette—holding newborn Aleta. (Photo by Deni Loubert.)

"Aleta," he said. And told me a harrowing story of the ups and downs of Aleta's teen years which were almost as harrowing as Chuck's own (which is to say, right over the edge).

I told him I remembered Rowen's name because, first of all, she was absolutely adorable and second of all because of an incident in a restaurant we had gone to after the second of the four signings. Rowen was acting up and daddy had cut her a certain amount of slack but she wasn't picking up on his increasingly less subtle warnings and he had come to the end of his patience. Finally he leaned in really close to her, squinting at her through his tinted aviator glasses and said, in a very level and direct tone:

"Rowen? Do you want to be made into a bar of soap?"

Rowen's bottom lip stuck out almost as far as her tiny brow had furrowed and she allowed as how, no, she didn't want to be made into a bar of soap. And she was as quiet as a deaf-mute through the rest of the meal. It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud and spoiling the effect but clearly once daddy had reached the point of threatening to turn you into a bar of soap you knew that you didn't want to move to the next step in the melodrama.

"You know," Chuck said (once he had stopped laughing) "We had to move from that house out to the farm. The neighbours reported us for the way that I talked to my kids. Called the social welfare people on us."

What a sad commentary, I thought. One of the few fathers on the planet who can actually keep his kids under some measure of control and he gets reported for it.

Anyway, here's the picture. Rowen, Chuck, Nanette, and Aleta Rozanski taken back at the Rozanksi homestead after the dinner in question. Does Rowen look traumatized to you? No, me neither. (An autographed gold logo Cerebus O for the first *Following Cerebus* reader who can identify the direct distribution company that Nan used to run back in the 1980s. Yes, they did distribute Cerebus).

Coincidentally Rowen Rozanski is now in charge of the "indy" side of Mile High Comics' vast operations. Chuck confided that he was very much opposed to Diamond's recent decision not to carry any independent book that failed to generate $1500 worth of sales. From long experience (he's been buying and selling comic books since 1971) he knows that there are books that are slow to catch on that need to be nurtured—sometimes for years—until they become profitable both for their creators

Dave Sim's preliminary sketch for the cover of Quack! *3 (right) and the finished Sim/Leialoha collaboration (above) indirectly led to the decision to do Cerebus as a self-published title.*

and for the stores that carry them. As the largest retail operation in North America (by a wide margin) Mile High is definitely doing what they can to pick up the slack, and he encourages any independent creators or publishers who have a title they want to bring to market to contact Will Moulton at *moulton@milehighcomics.com* (see page 37 for more information).

Send along samples and maybe Chuck won't have to turn you into a bar of soap.

Buddy Saunders

Buddy Saunders' Lone Star Comics and Science Fiction has to be one of Chuck Rozanski's nearest competitors when it comes to being the largest on-going retail chain in North America. He was very helpful in stepping into the breach on the 1982 American Tour when a couple of other Texas stores pulled out at the last minute. Arguably, if he hadn't been employing Craig Miller at the time—who interviewed me for *The Lone Star Express*, Lone Star's in-store publication—you might not be reading this very magazine today.

He's also nice enough to let Craig do things like dismantling wall displays after-hours and replacing them with unbagged back issues from December 1977 for the sake of the full page photo that accompanied the opening of the "Many Origins of Cerebus" feature last issue.

Unless that was done behind Buddy's back, in which case it happened at some other Dallas store entirely, and no Lone Star employees whatsoever were involved.[1]

Mike Friedrich

I hope everyone enjoyed my excerpts from a couple of Mike's letters from the fall of 1977. The pre-*Cerebus* material was the earliest part of the Cerebus Archive to be completed, and I really think there might be a book possible in the unhappy history of "The Beavers." I was thinking of calling it *Anatomy of a Canadian Failure.* I have to give Mike major props for being the guy who finally made me see just how thin the concept of the strip was and that I needed to produce something with more meat on its bones if I hoped to make it in this crazy business.

Your reproduction of the cover of *Quack* No.3 reminded me of a couple of other trains of thought that were occupying my attention at the time both of which were clarified, at least indirectly, by Mike Friedrich around this time. As you can see from my

[1]Craig's footnote: I wouldn't have dreamed of not clearing it with Buddy. His only comment was, "That's going to be a lot of work, reshooting the *Cerebus Companion* 1 photo." I said yeah, but the quality of that photo always annoyed me, and I was determined to get it right this time, which I mostly did (forgot to put Adams's *Superman Vs. Muhammed Ali* treasury in the photo, even though I had it pulled for the occassion. Darn). Also, I should have thanked Lone Star regional manager Mike Stover for assisting with the shoot.

preliminary sketch, I had taken Mike's initial idea and done what I considered to be a funny cover for a humour comic. The gag is dependent on the fact that it's called the "Special Dead Duck Issue" and that my character, Whitey, is depicted reading a copy of *Quack!* which he and his brother Red are evidently discussing, Red's bottom line reaction being "*Ducks*? Who cares about *ducks*?" In the background I've attempted to do a Chuck Jones-style *Daffy Duck*, holding up his "help!" sign as he's about to get crushed by a safe. Not exactly a laugh riot, but with all three elements in place it was, I figured, a good chance to raise a smile.

Now when you look at the finished cover, first of all you notice that the angle has been reversed. This was Mike making use of the old adage that you should never have your characters walking "out" of the comic book, they should always be depicted walking "into" the comic book. Seemed to me like one of those "editor" things, but Mike was the editor so the choice was out of my hands. Of course the first net result of that was that the front cover is no long visible in Whitey's hands, ergo the self-referential gag of the two of them discussing the comic book they're actually in is lost. Instead it looks as if Red is interrupting Whitey's reading with a non-sequitur about the imminent fate of the unnamed duck they aren't even looking at. Add to that the fact that the "Special Dead Duck Issue" cover copy has been deleted and suddenly you have a virtually Seinfeldian cover that used to be about dead ducks that is now about...nothing. In fact, arguably the last thing you want to have is a comic book called *Quack!* with the central character on the cover saying "*Ducks*?! Who *cares*?" You're practically ordering the reader not to buy the thing. You also lose the Yiddish flavour of "*Ducks*? Who cares about *ducks*?" The "book-ending" of the observation with the inherently funny word "ducks". The exclamation mark and question mark on the only use of the term "Ducks?!" and the inflated size of the lettering throws off the humour, calling attention to the emphasis—the size of the lettering and the question mark and the exclamation mark—rather than the word itself. And of course the duck has been changed from the hapless Daffy version into a generic Donald/Howard version. Daffy is funny, Donald isn't. I hate to break that to any Disney fans in the audience, but Donald Duck isn't funny and never has been. The Clarence Nash voice is funny, but that's it.

It really stuck with me because it seemed to call attention to the fact that no one seemed to know or care about doing actual humour in comics. It was either Kurtzman/Elder variants (filling the background with funny signs, book titles and billboards) or underground humour which hinged on finding dope-smoking and getting the munchies inherently hilarious by using the comic strip conventions invented by Elzie Segar and Floyd Gottfredson and others.

It was really the cover to *Quack!* No.3 that made me realize that there was a irresolvable dilemma inherent between being a good obedient contributor that did what my editor—Mike—asked me to do and producing actual humour. There was no way to draw a line in the sand over the fact that "Ducks? Who cares about ducks?" is a funnier line than "Ducks? Who cares?" without being seen as a nit-picking prima donna. Either you understand that the one line is funny and the other isn't or you don't. Mike didn't so that was the end of the discussion. The net result was that in my widest-ever exposure on the cover of a comic book, it meant that I had to take the blame for a cover being unfunny and not selling even though the decisions of how to make it funny so it would sell were taken out of my hands. Ultimately this would be a major motivation to do my own comic book where I was the final arbiter of what was funny and what wasn't funny and where I would be in the position to decide what worked and what didn't.

It was no small point and I appreciate the fact that it was brought home to me so completely by this particular episode. The best lessons are usually those that are the hardest to take at the time.

I learned a lot from Mike and was glad to see him agree to be interviewed. Remind me someday to tell you about the time I went ballistic on him when he asked if I would agree to interview comics professionals for his proposed revival of Roy Thomas' *Alter Ego*. His "reaction to my reaction" letter was very funny.

Bud Plant

Phil Seuling has been gone a long time now so it seems to me more important than ever to acknowledge the contribution of Bud Plant—who is not only still with us but whose business continues to flourish—in the opening up of the direct market and to the initial success of Cerebus. I had to laugh when I read about his garage filling up with back issues. Harry Kremer had the same problem. A couple of hundred extras of a title that comes out once or twice a year is a very different situation from a couple of hundred extras of a title that's being published monthly. I was glad to hear that he was finally able to sell all those funnybooks and get his garage back.

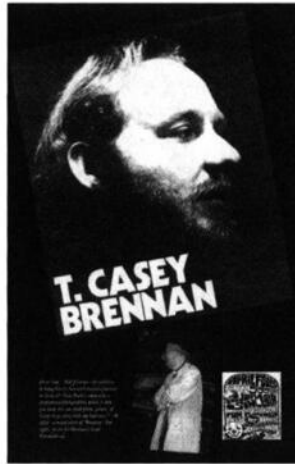
Check out www.budplant.com for the best in our field's prestigious art books and related material.

T.Casey Brennan: The Alan Moore of the 70s?

Great minds think alike and fools seldom differ. I had seriously considered mentioning to Craig that there was a photo of Casey in a Warren magazine of the time that showed him with the Ray Bradbury Cup and decided against it because I had no idea where it could be found. And there it is on page 17! I remember asking Casey why he looked so haggard in the picture and he told me that he had taken a bus from Ann Arbor, Michigan to New

York City that took some ungodly number of hours to arrive and that he had had a screaming baby in the seat behind him all the way which meant that he arrived with absolutely no sleep just in time for the ceremony.

I'm hoping that we'll be able to help out Casey with his homelessness situation through ACTOR and an auction of the updated "A Boy & His Aardvark" splash page. There didn't seem much chance of doing so until the article actually saw print so people would be aware of exactly who T. Casey Brennan is and his significance in *Cerebus'* history, but I'm typing this the day after the arrival our advance copies of issue 6, so we're definitely getting to the point where that is now going to be possible. Please stay tuned to this issue for late-breaking developments.

It's perhaps interesting to note that "Doorway to the Gods"—which is best known for being the back-up feature in *Fantasy Quarterly*, the comic book where Elfquest debuted—actually first appeared in *The Comic Report* issue 5/6 dated October 1976, a fanzine published here in Kitchener by Jeff Zinger, a high school student. Sporting a cover drawing of Captain Marvel by Gene Day, it certainly gives you a rough idea of how desperate a lot of us were for work at that time. I think Jeff paid $5 for the cover, paid Casey $10 for his script and only had enough left over to pay me $2 a page to draw the story. I really tried my best on the first two pages but finally cracked under the strain of the $2-a-page rate and cranked out the remaining four pages rationalizing to myself that it would probably only be seen by a few dozen Comic Report subscribers. Served me right when it turned up unannounced in my mailbox—no cover letter and no cheque—in the center section of my contributor's copy of *Fantasy Quarterly*.

Astute readers will note that I shamelessly—and I have to say quite badly—stole Esteban Maroto's wonderful design of the female lead in "A Stranger in Hell" (page 18 of issue 6) for the Pathmistress.

Craig and John made a try at securing the rights to reprint "On the Wings of a Bird" or "Carrier of the Serpent" by contacting Harris Publications (current publishers of *Vampirella*) and were informed that the issue of rights to *Creepy* and *Eerie* material make the *Miracleman* dispute look straightforward by comparison. There's an analogy that will make you back off in a hurry.

The last double-sized issue of Comic Report *with a rare Gene Day drawing of a super-hero—Captain Marvel—on its cover. Inside was the first appearance of the T. Casey Brennan/Sim collaboration "Doorway to the Gods" which was later printed in* Fantasy Quarterly *1, the first appearance of Elfquest.*

I hope everyone caught the fact that Craig and John got the "Picture This" pages in reverse order on page 22. The bottom version was from 1973 and the top version from 1975.[2]

Cerebus and "Not Loubert" Press

I don't really know how discreet I should be about the mysterious Eric Hope, who was the putative editor of the fledgling and ultimately moribund *Cerebus the Fanzine*. Reading this section when the finished magazine came in, I thought "The more discreet I am, the more mysterious he becomes." Eric was a high school friend of Michael Loubert's and sort of a classic "troubled youth" poster child. There was enormous enmity between him and his father so that Eric got thrown out

[2]Craig's footnote: I'm pretty sure that's the way they came through as labeled on disc, but of course it's completely obvious, seeing them in final printed form, which is the more accomplished version. Beginning with this issue, I've started faxing to Dave most pages as they're being laid out so that obvious gaffes such as "Picture This" can be avoided. I don't know about him, but mistakes like that drive me crazy.

Correction from last issue: the art on the left is from 1973; the art on the right is 1975 (not the other way around).

of the house and was, for a period of time, living in an abandoned car. Then he attempted suicide and spent a period of time in the psychiatric ward at K-W Hospital (today called Grand River Hospital). By the time I met him, he was a good deal more stable than he had been, although he was still something of a loose cannon and was always at odds and evens during the period I knew him—1976 to 1980. I was going to interview Michael for the "Many Origins" issue but realized he was right when he said, "That was almost thirty years ago," and that he didn't remember much from the time period. One of the times that I ran across him on the street, I mentioned my theory that *Cerebus the Fanzine* had struck me at the time as something that Deni had started as a kind of social work/therapy for Eric, something that he could do as part of a writing and drawing group so he wouldn't feel so completely dissociated from the world in general.

Michael said that sounded about right to him.

Michael D. Christoffers

Very gratifying indeed to find out that Michael believes in God because of reading *Cerebus*. It certainly makes up for the hundreds (if not thousands) of others who have decided that I'm clinically insane. One step at a time, I guess.

Interesting theory that Michael presents that Sheshep caused the stool to throw Cerebus to his death. It's certainly nothing that I intended when I was planning or writing and drawing issue 300 but it certainly fits the known facts so maybe it was something I intended unconsciously.

Michael's mentioning of the Cirinists arrival on the scene at the end of *Form & Void* reminded me that I've had a few inquiries on the subject along the lines of "How did they get there so quickly?" The answer that I hoped was obvious (and evidently wasn't) was that they knew exactly where Cerebus and Jaka were going the whole time. Cerebus wasn't talking about it but as could be seen in Jaka's conversation with Mary Ernestway, Jaka wasn't exactly keeping their ultimate destination a deep, dark secret. The Cirinists' concern was more their perceived need to contain the potential threat that an alliance between the former Pope (and object of Rick's prophecies which were being widely disseminated and becoming more and more popular) and the niece of the Grandlord of Palnu represented—a threat that was potentially worsened by any attempt to kill either one of them. Knowing—as the Cirinists did—the situation that Cerebus would be walking in on in Sand Hills Creek they just stayed on the sidelines and waited to see how things would shake out. When the net effect was a rupture in the relationship they were right there ready to sweep Jaka away before Cerebus could have second thoughts or Jaka could plead her case. A very smooth and very typical Cirinist operation. Make use of violent emotions, portray yourself as sympathetic and empathetic (handing Missy to Jaka was an effective touch, reducing her to an infantile state in a vulnerable moment) and move the story into your own preferred channels. Worked like a charm.

Rick Norwood

Wow, interesting that both Rick and Bashful Bry tackled the same topic this issue.

I'd have to see a lot more *Dark Shadows* than I have to be able to give an honest reaction to whether or not it qualifies as a sustained narrative, Rick. I did read an article a while back about how the re-

lease of old television series on DVD is starting to reshape the nature of entertainment consumption in North America with people holding marathon weekend-long Complete Season viewings. I wonder what the long-term implications of that end up being? I would suspect that it will result in a winnowing process where a lot of lengthy serialized entertainments will prove to be over-stuffed and largely unsatisfying while the ones that actually hold up under repeated viewings will become perennial best-sellers. If the complete *Dark Shadows* is still flying off the shelves ten years from now, I think that will make the case for you.

Along the same lines, there was a certain mystique attached to *The Prisoner* after its initial run on TV that made many of us glom onto it when it would be rerun late at night or on Public Television back in the 70s before VCRs (yes, little children, there was a time when VCRs didn't exist). After about the third or fourth go-round, however, the net assessment seemed to be: lame ending. I never saw the ending, so I don't have an opinion one way or the other. I liked Jack Kirby's comic-book adaptation that never got published (from what I saw of it), but the actual series never really captured my interest enough to make sure I never missed an episode and to keep watching until the end.

When you've done the 500 hours sometime later in the decade, please write and tell us what your overall impression is. As likewise I hope others will offer their personal opinion of the best sustained TV narratives out there. What ten- or twenty-hour marathon viewing was worth the trip for you?

Wow, Craig—another "TV Issue" tie-in!

Mind Games

Write to us at:
Following Cerebus
P.O. Box 1283
Arlington, TX 76004

e-mail:
editors@followingcerebus.com

Hi,

Congratulations on a very moving tribute to the origins of *Cerebus*, and, more generally, the whole atmosphere from which it sprung. Your fine creative snapshot of a small group of young cartoonists and retailers in the mid-1970's really affected me. A truly poignant read.

When I moved away from my college town to join the Army (primarily as a result of reading the serialized *Latter Days*) I went for the last time into the local comic store for my last Wednesday visit. I was an emotional wreck, knowing I'd lose all my friends, knowing how delusional society was, realizing how downright extraordinary life itself is. *Cerebus* had just ended, too, so it was already as if a friend had died. And there was a bespectacled boy, no older than nine or ten years old, earnestly discussing with the store-owner, a nice chubby bald man, Spider-Man's powers, really trying to figure out "how can he climb on walls without setting off his web-shooters?" or something like that. And I just lost it. I was in tears by the time I got to the counter with my couple of comics. While reading *Following Cerebus* 6 I had the same reaction. (Well, I wasn't in tears...but, you know.)

To me, there's this total beauty in this reality we fans and artists inhabit, so separate from so much of the world's genuine (and imagined) pain and misery, hardship and strife. Seeing Dave and Diamond Comics Distributors owner Steve Geppi at the baseball game. Seeing Dave and Ger's (needless to say) splendid reproduction of the page from "A Boy and His Aardvark." Seeing Dave's skills improve and his peers' motivating him. The art show. The Shuster and other awards. The scattered panels and strips throughout. The (ha, ha) Buffy pic-of-the-month. The cover montage. All these men's lives laid bare over the course of time. It's all so wonderful. I feel so privileged and special to enjoy it all. Thank you for making such a fine record of this slice of comics' history I didn't know about, and the trail-blazing role Dave Sim played in it. This book just gets better and better every issue.
SPC David Carrington
Fort Monroe, VA
e-mail

Thanks, David. We weren't sure how much of the 1977 comics scene history would be common knowledge and how much would be new information to present-day readers, but we had a great time putting it together.

Hiya,

I just read your editorial in the first issue of *Following Cerebus*.

The issue of Art having a life above and beyond the artist is very interesting indeed. One example for me is this drawing I did for the poster for a Danish avant-garde media/music event. (It was in B/W line art in the poster.)

People have asked me: "Is it a tree or a mushroom cloud?"

I answer that when I drew it, it was a tree, for me. At the same time, I have to admit that not only does it really look like a mushroom cloud, but that exact form is the only form it could have in this drawing, according to my inspiration and perception of it. (The assignment was: "make a poster for a production called *The Swan And the Swine*.") So... who knows.
Yours,
Eolake
e-mail

Hi There,

I just had a quick question for you, and I apologize if all this is in issue #1 of *Following Cerebus*, but I have loaned my copy out and don't have it. My question is if you guys still want/need/accept submissions for *Following Cerebus*. I have been a fan of the little aardvark for about ten years or so now, and being an English graduate student also, from time to time I get the chance to infinitely piss off my professors and incorporate comics into my papers. I have an essay I have been working on for a while. The basic thesis of the paper is demonstrating how *Cerebus* (in my opinion the most groundbreaking and important comic of the last twenty years or so) catapults the comic book medium into new territory by utilizing the medium as a dynamic one that can take many forms — and by "forms" I don't just mean in terms of design, aesthetic, or subject matter; mainly, I mean as literary criticism, specifically in *The Fall and the River*, where Cerebus becomes blatant liter-

ary criticism of Fitzgerald and its scholarship. On top of that, it is competent, current, and professional criticism—something even the most "prestigious" (their word, not mine) literary journals fail to do on a regular basis.

I should also add that while I am aware that the same thing is pretty much done with Hemingway in the story arc immediately following *Fall and the River*, I am much less familiar with Hemingway scholarship and therefore limited my paper to the work as it relates to Fitzgerald alone. Anyhow, if you think this might be suitable for *Following Cerebus*, or you would at least want to take a look at it as a possible piece for a future issue, I would love to polish it up and send it your way; just give me a rough idea of when you might need it by. If not, no sweat—I will keep buying and enjoying *Following Cerebus* all the same! Thanks for putting it together, and thanks for your time!
Daniel Robbins
e-mail

This is probably as good a time as any to let people know that we do, indeed, accept submissions. While up to this point FC *has pretty much been the Craig & John/Dave & Gerhard show, we'd love to read other people's analyses of the* Cerebus *epic. The "Something Fell" and storytelling essays (in issues 1 and 2, respectively) are generally the kinds of things we like to see, which, Daniel, your Fitzgerald piece appears to fit the bill. We like the tone geared to a college-educated audience, but without the academic jargon that clogs up a lot of literary journals.*

We aren't sure how other magazines work this kind of thing, but for us, the best way to go on something already written is just to send it. You can send in inquiry first, but in most cases we can't say much definitively until we see the final piece anyway. And an inquiry letter just gives us one more e-mail to send out—and we have a hard enough time keeping up with our overstuffed inbox as it is.

If, on the other hand, you have not written your essay yet, but just have an idea for something, then sure, drop us a preliminary note just so you won't be spending hours and hours and hours writing something that we already have or are already working on.

Also, obviously we enjoy seeing comic strips, too, addressing various aspects of Cerebus. *We've published several and have more waiting in the wings.*

Hello,

I am wondering if the magazine will be collected and put into "phonebooks" like the *Cerebus* trade paperbacks. It would be nice to have them on the shelf next to each other.
Thank you,
Matt
e-mail

We get this question a lot, so we might as well address it here. Right now, we still have all back issues in stock, and until our supplies diminish, it doesn't make much sense to collect the material into trade paperback "phonebooks."

Occasionally we'll get someone saying that they love the issues but aren't buying them yet—they're waiting for the collections. We tell them that while there may be collections sometime down the road, there also may not be, so if you like what you're seeing, don't pass up the individual issues while they're still easily available!

But we agree with you, Matt—it would be very nice, indeed, to have them on the shelf one day.

Thou Good and Faithful Cerebite

by Bryan Douglas

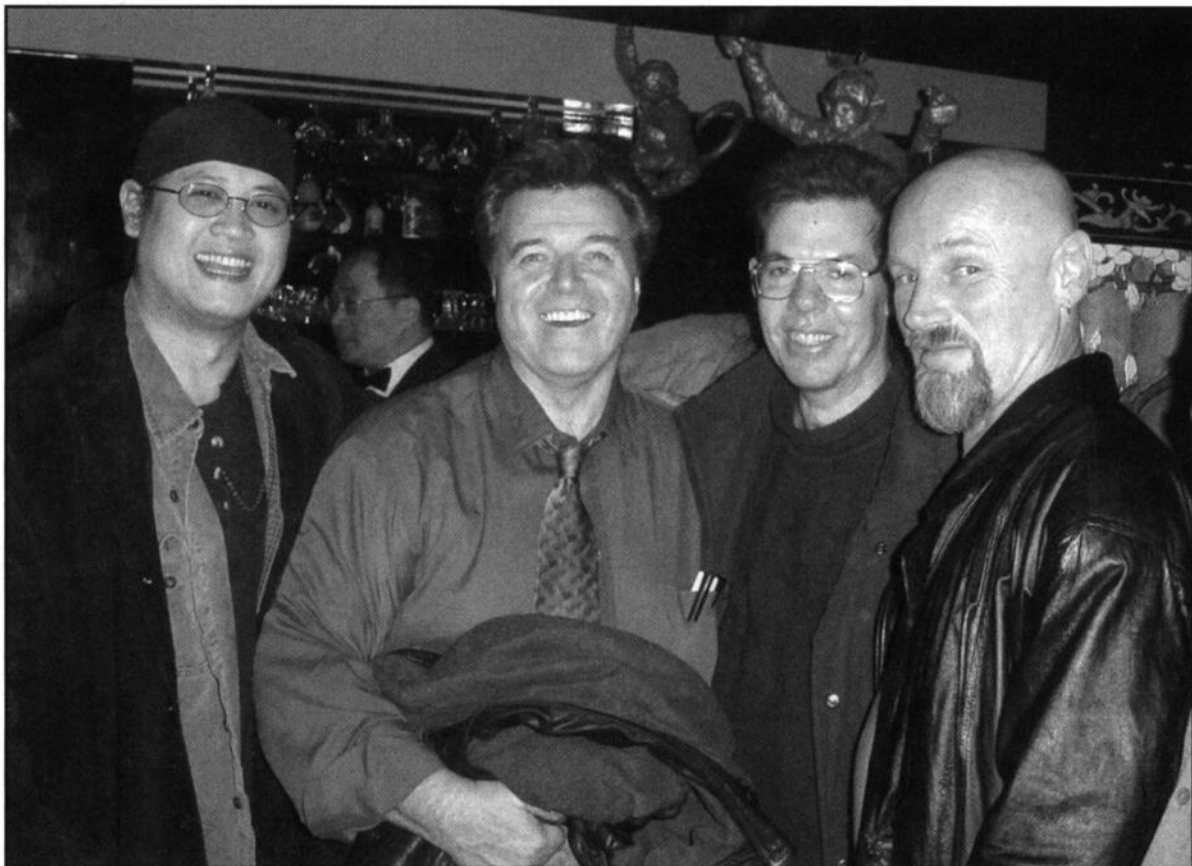
Another Thing Coming

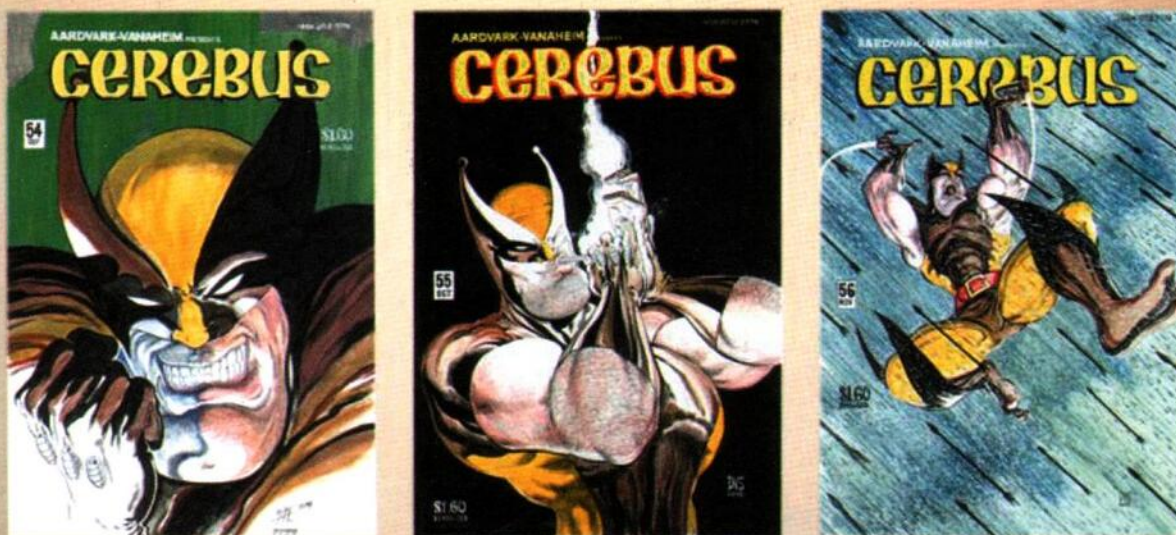
NEWS & MORE

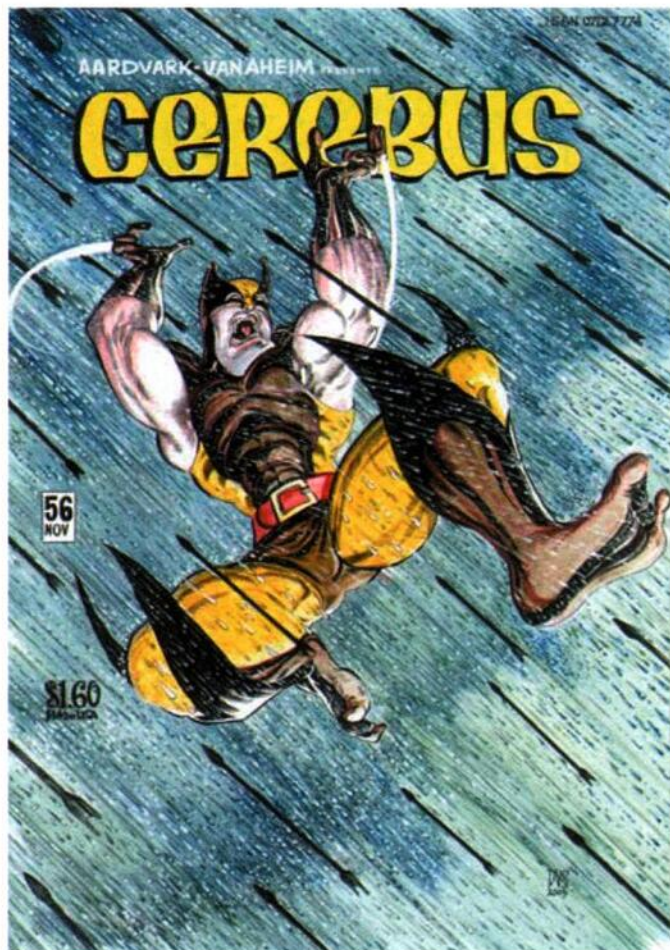
Gun Fu: Showgirls Are Forever

Gun Fu: Showgirls are Forever (Image) is a one-shot co-written by Dave Sim and sports a Sim/Gerhard cover, along with Howard M. Shum and Joey Mason. The story takes place in 1941. France has succeeded in setting the world record for the quickest surrender to Nazi Germany without putting up a fight. Nazi collaborating French showgirls are on a secret mission to attack a neutral United States. Cheng Bo Sen is a Hong Kong cop and British secret agent. He also speaks hip-hop, which no one seems to notice. Shum co-wrote, with interior art by Darryl Young and Shum. Check out the madness in late March. In the meantime, here's the black-and-white version of the cover!

Et Cetera

Night Flight Comics (Salt Lake City, UT) noted in their *Comics & Games Retailer* 167 (February) market report, "Movin' on up: *Following Cerebus.* We are getting more new readers every issue." Part of the reason we're addressing a wide variety of topics in this magazine (Will Eisner, copyright, etc.) is so that even non-*Cerebus* fans will find something to enjoy, and also to keep the magazine lively and unpredictable. So fans of Neil Gaiman, Frank Miller, Barry Windsor-Smith, Harvey Kurtzman, Harlan Ellison, Joe Bob Briggs, J. Michael Straczynski, etc. may pick up an issue here and there. We'd encourage stores to try, for instance, racking some copies of *FC* 5 with the *Sandman* and *Sin City* graphic novels, or *FC* 4 with the *Spirit* hardcovers. You never know how many extra sales you might pick up. We speak from experience. Our coverage of *The X-Files* in *Wrapped in Plastic* not only helped sales of *WIP*. Some of those readers became intrigued with the *Twin Peaks* material and became fans of that show. An Eisner or Gaiman fan could begin reading *FC* for those features and end up buying some of the *Cerebus* graphic novels from your store to see what all the talk is about.

Buzz Dixon, Neal Adams, Dave Sim and Jim Starlin after the Annual CGC dinner held at Shin Lee's on West 65th Street in New York the Saturday night of the three-day Big Apple National show. Photo by Pete Dixon.

DAVE'S A.C.T.O.R. BENEFIT AUCTION PIECES

Prototype #1: The Wolveroach Triptych A series of three colour-proof reproductions of my ink and watercolour "revisitings" of the covers of *Cerebus* issues 54, 55 and 56 (which were originally done in black and white with mechanical colour separations back in 1983). By doing these three cover parodies of Frank Miller and Joe Rubinstein's covers to the first Wolverine mini-series which had come out the year before I really pushed the envelope of what constituted the limits of "fair usage" in the context of parody given that the only *real* difference between Marvel's trademarked and copyrighted Wolverine character and Wolveroach was the little round antennae balls attached to the ends of Wolveroach's mask. No wonder Jim Shooter came up to me before a convention panel and gave me a friendly warning not to do that again without asking permission!

Although most cover recreations attempt to reproduce the original version with pin-point accuracy, I've adopted a slightly different approach of attempting to get a little closer to what I had pictured in my head but which the limits of my ability as well as the constraints of a monthly schedule at the time kept me from achieving.

Original Watercolour and ink "revisiting" of the cover of Cerebus *No.56* – It was while laying in the background colour for this cover that I conceived the idea of incorporating a severe thunderstorm which had not been part of the original cover. I experimented pretty extensively with a half dozen different ways of rendering rain—both in watercolour and gouache—and spent the better part of two days rendering all of the original raindrops by hand. It was only when I had the cover done and on the wall next to the cover of No.55 that I decided it was "too busy" especially since the idea was to make the three pieces look like a natural triptych. So, I ultimately rejected this attempt and will try again later in the year to do the cover of No.56 this time without raindrops. I think it looks okay on its own, just not as part of the triptych. So my waste of two days of working time (as well as a lot of green, blue and white paint) is A.C.T.O.R.'s gain and they get to auction these two one-of-a-kind items—the only "Raindrop" Triptych prototype and the rejected "Raindrop" cover for the benefit of their very worthwhile organization.

Next year, I hope to provide A.C.T.O.R. with a *Finished Wolveroach Triptych Proof Set* for auction and (if not) to provide you with *Prototype #2: The Wolveroach Triptych.*

I'll just keep trying 'til I get it right!